

Deathless 146

Chapter 146 (I) Compromised

Why bother with social skills?

Well, I'm glad you asked that, Adept Arrow, and congratulations on reaching Adept. It is a rare feat for someone your age and for a student still in the Academy to step beyond the Initiate Tier. You should be proud. In fact, you should be even prouder than you're feeling right now. That's right, that's the expression I want to see. More smiles, larger smiles. Good, good. Keep smiling.

Now turn, turn and look at the faces of your classmates. Look at that. Are those smiles? Those are scowls. Those are jealous scowls. Here is the deal about social skills. We are creatures of society. We are creatures of communication. We are creatures of interaction. And this, too, is something that can be practiced.

You don't need to be a Psychomancer to influence people. The mind is contained within itself, and it receives stimuli from the outside, stimuli that I'm currently conveying through words. And with a few words and a few proper inflections of my tone, thanks to my Rhetoric and Psychology, I managed to make you feel so proud of yourself that you're preening like a peacock. And I managed to increase the jealousy of your peers and, by that, your team to a magnitude with which something might happen if I were to allow it to persist.

There we go. All those smiles and scowls are gone. Finally, you're paying attention. Good. The class can begin.

Why social skills, you ask? Because social skills are part of war. You need to defend yourself. You need to be aware when someone's trying to manipulate you or influence you. Let's examine one of the many serious problems befalling our republic right now: severe and rampant infidelity. Constant family infighting, spilling over into the streets. Oh, I see some of you shifting uncomfortably. This is also a failure of social skills. Why, it's easy for those who care for each other to be turned when their feelings

are broken, when one lacks the proper and adequate social skills to protect themselves from seduction or deception or any other form of manipulation.

Now, you can comfort yourself and say, "Oh, I can kill anyone. These are Non-Martial Pathbearers." But you don't kill anyone. At least you don't kill everyone, because that comes at a cost as well. Do not delude yourself into thinking you are beyond society. The Republic made you what you are, and without the proper means of protecting your personality, your mind, the darker aspects of the Republic will devour you from inside your own psyche.

Open the books. Today, we learn the basics. Today, you start spotting if someone is trying to manipulate you, and how to respond properly. Your other instructors will see you prepared for the battlefield. I will prepare you for the dangers of life.

-Master Sasha Orray, CHARM-309 Phoenix Academy

The orcs dealt with the surviving members of the Inquisition with some mercy and moderate expediency. There wasn't even any actual prolonged torture, much to Shiv's relief. However, the inquisitors were divided up among the orcs to be slain in a variety of ways he wouldn't mind forgetting, and a few were handed over to a cabal of orc Psychomancers for false-flag purposes against the Necrotechs.

When they finished, the stealthiest members of the orc army immediately vanished into thin air as they moved on Lost Angeles. The others followed Shiv back through the gateway, carrying a baggage train of equipment in tow. Shiv, meanwhile, hid his new armor within his cape, giving it more time to regenerate the damage it had sustained during the battle. That, and he would need Helix's aid to fuse his current bone armor with the Husk of the Voidmantid properly.

As they crossed through the Surface Gateway, Shiv found himself greeted by the insides of a teleportation anchor rather than one of Adam's dimensional tunnels or the open air of Gate Asshole—true name still pending. No spells lined the insides of the anchor, but the material that blocked his path resembled a curved wall of reinforced titanium.

“Oh dear,” Bonk said, tapping his grotesque club against a large hand. “Have we been locked out and banished from our home? Are we exiled?”

“No,” Ikki’s voice sounded through the metal. “We’re just setting up the security checkpoints for each of the gateways.”

“Security checkpoints?” Bonk asked. He chuckled darkly. “Why? Do you not trust us to protect you from the horrible, dangerous monsters outside, little Umbral?”

“You are the horrible, dangerous monsters,” Ikki chirped. “So, no. Not even a bitty-bit. The only one of you I trust is Shiv, who’s... also kind of a monster, but he’s our monster! Now, give me a second. I’ll find Adam. He’ll get you guys back across to the Tutorial Gateway. Won’t take long!”

A silence followed. Helix turned to regard Shiv. “She seems to think highly of you. Judging from her tone and inflection, it sounds like she admires you quite a bit.”

Shiv laughed quietly. “Yeah, Ikki is pretty cute—” He paused as he realized he was about to start telling the orcs about his experiences back at Weave. A heavy pride filled his chest as his mind went back to how he sacrificed himself for Uva and her team at Passage. The pride endured, but it was joined by suspicion. Shiv’s laugh died, and he started glaring at the orcs. “Psychology Skill?”

"Sweet Talker," Whisper whispered with a faint smile. "Silver Tongue Skill Evolution. But good job, Insul. You noticed."

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The Deathless scoffed at the orcs. "Yeah. Another ethical rule: stop messing with my head."

The orcs just chuckled, and Shiv shook his head and muttered under his breath, "Can't ever let my guard down around you bastards."

"Then we are training you well," Helix replied quietly.

Shiv frowned as he stared at the orc. "Training?"

Helix didn't bother responding.

"Alright!" Ikki called out. "Can't find Adam, but I got a few Dimensionalists. They'll start teleporting you guys over. How many of you are there?"

"Oh, just a bit below eighteen thousand now," Mortar declared.

"Eighteen? How many of you died during that raid?" Ikki sounded concerned. Her worry made the orcs develop feral grins in response.

"Not nearly enough for it to be fun, I'm afraid," Mortar mournfully sighed. He eyed Shiv with an expression of bloodlust. "But this will be solved soon. And you can thank Shiv for that. He is ever so thoughtful."

"Uh-huh. Well. That wasn't super creepy at all. Alright: Dimensional bridges incoming! Nice and orderly lines, people."

Her words were unnecessary as the orcs were already neatly arranged.

For about an hour afterward, the orcs transitioned across the Surface Gateway checkpoint back to the bunker built over the Tutorial Gateway. The bulk of the orcs crossed over with their new loot, chattering to each other about whether they wanted to double-dip on the surface or head to the Abyss to brutalize the vampires next.

As the train of orcs filtered through the Tutorial Gateway, Shiv noted how the Psychomancers carried the surviving Inquisitors across with special care. As the Deathless made sure the final few orcs passed through without issue, Helix hesitated just before passing through the gateway. "You are not coming with us, then?"

"No, I got an interrogation to catch up on," Shiv said. "I want to see just what that Master-Inquisitor knows; figure out the next steps and all that."

Helix nodded very slowly, and he adopted a pensive expression. "When you are done, come find me aboard the Court Leviathan. There are things we need to talk about, and your training must continue, starting with the full regeneration and merging of your current armor with the Husk I just offered you."

Shiv was quite looking forward to that, though he didn't let it show on his face much.

"Do not keep me waiting long, Insul," Helix warned. "I do not wish to be sitting idle while all the other orcs get to indulge in festivities. Understand that I am making a great sacrifice on the part of my pleasure and education, restraining myself from heading down to the Abyss. You have no idea how my blood yearns to punish the feeble Bloodspawn."

"Yeah, yeah," Shiv grinned. "I'll be there soon. Someone's gotta keep an eye on you ugly gray bastards so you stick to the rules."

"Good, good. I'm glad I could rely on you to be righteous at the very least," Helix chuckled. "Righteous and greedy." He regarded Shiv one final time, and his eyes glinted before he crossed over.

And as soon as he did, Shiv felt a strange hollowness inside himself, as if something had been taken from him, or a weight had receded from his body. "Might just be the tension," he muttered to himself. He'd done a lot more killing than cooking recently. Frankly, there wasn't even any parity between the two. He'd been spending way too much time fighting. "Godsdamned System just wants me to be a butcher, it seems."

After he left the bunker, he headed toward the gate's oubliette. That's where he guessed Adam had brought the Master-Inquisitor. As he arrived at the temporary prison, he found armored walls being built up along the surface district.

Atop the parapets were dimensionals constantly monitoring the surrounding area. Their bodies resembled embers, but every now and again between undulating flickers, Shiv glimpsed humanoid forms. More than that, most of the structures in the surface district were being reinforced. They were thickening into brutalist blocks, and far below the surface district, another set of compounds were being erected. Shiv saw a great deal of Umbral and Weaveress traffic there. Perhaps Null Mont was setting up a separate base far from the center. He didn't blame her. With the Tutorial right here, things could go poorly fast.

The entire gate was awash with motion. Dimensionals drifted through the air, and towering constructs formed from earth and steel shoved bits of rubble into themselves. Humble Geomancers continued to tidy the rubble and ruin left over from all the battles the gate had suffered. Shiv also noticed a titanium cylinder built over the abyssal gateway as well. Ikki wasn't kidding when she said they were taking precautions, installing checkpoints everywhere. The damned orcs made life inconvenient, but ultimately, the damned orcs had their benefits as well. One such benefit lurked within Shiv's cape. As he prepared to descend, he opened a hatch into the oubliette.

"Shiv," someone called out.

The Deathless turned, and he found Valor hovering just behind him. The Legendary Pathbearer was alone, and something about his body language and the way the flames within his skull sockets were flickering told Shiv that Valor had been waiting for him.

"Valor," Shiv called out. "Are they down there? Has the interrogation started already?"

"Yes. However, I think we should take a walk for a few moments. It has been some time since we had a chance to talk."

Shiv felt an odd feeling creep through his gut. He had no apprehensions about speaking to Valor, but the way the Legendary Pathbearer was broaching this topic felt odd. Like they were about to do something taboo. Even so, Shiv ultimately relented. "Alright, so you want to go somewhere?"

"No, just around the tower is fine. This shouldn't take overly long."

They began their walk as Valor asked Shiv what he thought about their most recent raid, what he thought of the orcs' performance, what he thought they could do better, what he thought he could do better. Shiv answered the questions as honestly as he could, but it felt like Valor was avoiding a central topic.

"Good, very good. So you can tell how the orcs still have their inefficiencies, yes?" Valor looked at Shiv, and the Deathless just nodded.

"Yeah, I saw a few of them get caught out of position. They're not stupid, but they get overly bloodthirsty, then they kind of get carried away by hurting people—wasted a lot of opportunities to keep attacking. They were too busy trying to hurt and torture people. Also, they really don't care about friendly fire that much."

Valor let out a humorless laugh. "No such thing as friendly fire with those creatures, I'm afraid. All fire is meant to harm, and there are no friends, not truly." Valor paused for a beat as he simply stared at Shiv. The Deathless shifted uncomfortably.

"Alright, yeah, I kind of get that."

"Do you?" Valor asked, lifting a ghostly eyebrow. Shiv wasn't sure how to respond to that. Now it felt like Valor was trying to grill him. "Earlier, when you had your conversation with the orcs, when you tried to instill some ethics into them, how did that go?"

Shiv hesitated before he replied. "Well, I had to do some negotiating. The orcs are... They got a bit of an itch to scratch. You might already know that better than I do."

"Did they kill the Inquisitors?" Valor asked very casually.

Shiv's mouth opened slightly as he thought back to what happened to the still-living pile of inquisitors. "Yeah," Shiv said slowly. "They're dead, most of them. The orcs kept a few for false-flag purposes. Psychomancers took them. I suspect that the orcs are probably going to make them into double agents or something."

"I suspect you're right there," Valor said in agreement. "They will likely recondition the minds of those Inquisitors and send them after the Necrotechs or back to the main Inquisitorial army as spies. The opportunities there are countless, but the morality of such an action is questionable at best."

"Yeah," Shiv replied awkwardly. It still felt like Valor was probing for something, but he couldn't quite tell what.

"Does it bother you," Valor asked, "that they're taking inquisitors as prisoners? That they're going to twist their minds and use them as unwitting pawns, as expendable slaves?" Valor's description of how the inquisitors were going to be spent made Shiv cringe.

"Um, I mean, I wouldn't exactly call them slaves."

"Very well," Valor scoffed slightly. "Let us call them something else. Perhaps exploited prisoners, or orc entertainment, or human resources. The fundamental action behind what is going to happen to them does not change." Valor let out a quiet sigh. "Shiv, when they killed the Inquisitors, how did they do it?"

"Well, there wasn't really one way they killed them. Some of them..."

"Was it fast?" Valor asked again. There was no heat to his voice, and his expression was unreadable, yet Shiv's mouth ran dry. He licked his lips as his stomach grew taut.

"...Fast-ish," he replied, sounding extremely unconvincing.

"Do you have a time for how long it took them to finish the inquisitors off?"

"I don't know." Shiv coughed. "Maybe ten minutes or so?"

"Ten minutes," Valor said. And for a while, the Legendary Pathbearer spoke no more. He stopped in place, right beside the infirmary, and he directed his gaze skyward at the abnormal mana core, glowing bright in the distance.

Shiv went still a step away from him, and discomfort began to build inside the Deathless as the silence dragged on, like barbs digging through his own flesh. "Valor?" Shiv asked. "Is there something wrong?"

"Is there something wrong?" Valor asked in turn. He looked down at Shiv again, studying the Deathless. "What do you think, Shiv?" Shiv wasn't sure how to answer that question. Before he could, Valor asked him another. "Do you enjoy the attention the orcs gift you?"

"Gift me?" Shiv said. He fought the urge to reach inside his cape, to push the armor in even deeper.

"They are lavishing you with attention, and mostly positive attention at that. Brutal as they are, the reinforcement they have provided you thus far has been overwhelmingly affirming. They have included you among their number. They have allowed you to partake in activities they usually only enjoy with other orcs. You're a celebrity. Do you enjoy it?"

Shiv's mouth opened and closed several times, and he fought through the discomfort. "Yeah," Shiv said. "Yeah, I like it. I haven't forgotten what they are, if that's what you're worried about."

"No," Valor cut him off for a third time. "I'm no longer worried, Shiv. But now I see what must be done. You are already compromised."

"What?" Shiv said. He had no idea what Valor was talking about. He reached inside his mind using his Psychomancy, but he felt nothing there. Even Uva has Psychomancy strands. I would have noticed if one of the orcs...

"I don't mean that they have touched your mind, at least not directly. No, you are not compromised psionically. You are compromised socially."

A reflexive swell of burning anger arose inside Shiv, but before he could reject that, he noted the anger, noted how foreign it felt. He never felt such petulance towards Valor before. Right now, however, he wanted to tell the Legendary Pathbearer to stop bothering him, that he was perfectly fine, perfectly aware of who he was and what the orcs were. But was he perfectly fine? Was he perfectly aware?

"The fuck did they do to me?" Shiv muttered, blinking hard. It was like Valor's words just woke him from a stupor.

"Finally," Valor said, with a slight hint of joy to his voice, "you've noticed. That is a good start." Slowly, the anger began to dissipate, and a rush of other emotions followed. Disgust, horror, and... "Shit," Shiv muttered to himself. At some point, while talking to the orcs, there was less him imposing his will on them, and more them influencing him.

"Yeah, look, Valor, they didn't take ten minutes to kill all those Inquisitors. They took about twenty. And a few of them, uh, did stuff that I normally wouldn't like very much." He looked down at the ground, slightly ashamed. "They, uh, they might have also bribed me with a new piece of armor."

And instead of chiding Shiv, the Legendary Pathfarer just chuckled humorously. "Of course they did. It is a very reliable way of influencing someone. Silver Tongue, Sweet Talker, Heart Render, Gaze of Affection, Bribery... These are all Social Skills. Social Skills that you do not have, that you are ultimately unaware of. And these are Social Skills that you have been exposed to before the orcs."

"So, you mean they've just been manipulating me all this time? Well, I kind of knew that already."

Valor shook his head. Shiv paused and let him continue his explanation. "There are two layers to orc manipulation. The first is the obvious, their overt approaches. But the orcs are cunning and insidious creatures. More than anything, they are also subtle creatures. Their overt actions allow them to learn your ways, to see how you react to certain stimuli, to certain ideas."

"And from there, they adapt, and they make a more subtle approach," Shiv guessed.

"Correct," Valor said. "You are honest. You are brutal. You are direct. And so the orcs avoid being direct. Worse, every now and again, they let you catch them making an overt attempt. They let you think that you are noticing. And that decreases your suspicion. It makes you think you have the better of them. This has two effects. The first, it increases your Psychology levels. It amplifies your Social Skills. But it still allows them to manipulate you. Still."

Shiv breathed. "Godsdamn fucking orcs." He felt his hands start shaking a little at how hard they twisted his head. "So everything I've noticed so far might be something they've fed to me on a silver platter."

"Yes," Valor confirmed. "But this is good. It is a useful lesson, and it has done what I wanted it to."

"What you wanted it to?" Shiv asked, confused. "Wait, you wanted me to get fooled?"

"I thought of intervening earlier," Valor mused. "I thought of intervening several times. In fact, I wanted to take your place, to deal with the Challenger in your stead. But with how the orcs were fixated on you, with how much they valued your presence, I realized this is to our benefit as well."

"Me getting manipulated is to our benefit?"

"Yes," Valor said without any hesitation. "The orcs are formidable adversaries socially as well. And so, you will have to grow quickly to face them, to even protect yourself against them. This will prepare you

for future social encounters. The fact that they have managed to manipulate you is good. It will increase your paranoia. It will make sure you think thrice before assuming anything. In the future, whenever the orcs say anything to you, you will likely think back to this moment. Back to how they influenced you. How they turned your character in on itself using your flaws. And how they managed to compromise your efforts."

"So you wanted me to learn a lesson," Shiv said. The Deathless clenched his teeth as he felt frustration boil underneath his flesh. "You know, Valor, I think I'd rather you intervened instead. I, uh... The fact that you allowed them to brutalize those inquisitors means that you didn't care much for them in the first place, doesn't it?"

"Psychological manipulation isn't mind-control, Shiv. Once again, you are not compromised psionically. You are compromised behaviorally and socially. Your flaw here wasn't that you are bribable." Valor paused and cocked his head. "Being bribable is also a flaw, however. It allows people to own you, to own certain decisions you make. I recommend that you get rid of it. However good a piece of equipment might be, or however much someone may offer you in terms of treasure, understand that it is not yours. Because you have given a piece of yourself away to gain such things. It doesn't make you a slave, but it does make you predictable. And those who become predictable are easy victims."

Shiv tried to think of something to say, but nothing came to him. There was just an ill feeling in his stomach, and a growing sensation of shame.

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Valor gave Shiv a slight smile. "If you are ashamed, that is good. It means you have some morals that you can build on. Continuing off my previous point, your problem isn't even bribery. It's the fact that you are too simple."

Shiv pressed his lips together. "Look, I'm trying to squeeze out more time for my studies..."

"No, I don't mean simple in the mental fashion, Shiv. I have never meant that in the mental fashion. I mean that you have not gone into depth about who you are or who you want to be. If you have, it was only brief. You are effectively malleable. Malleable to the shaping influences of those around you. I am one such influence, but so are Adam, Uva, Can Hu, but also the orcs, especially the orcs. They likely know they cannot make you a wholesale murderer of innocents, so they won't try to push you to the degree that you will casually allow them to slaughter children with impunity."

But that reminded Shiv of someone else.

"I'm going to kill Male Pregnancy," Shiv snarled suddenly.

"What?" Valor replied with stupefied confusion, his train of thought broken. "Male... Pregnancy? What—is this a new skill you gained?"

"No. There was an orc called Male Pregnancy. You talking about them slaughtering children reminds me of what Male Pregnancy did in the middle of the fight. I think he made someone give birth, and then he ate the baby."

Valor's jaw opened and closed several times, and then the Legendary Pathbearer let out a shuddering breath. "I must confess to despising orcs, Shiv."

"Yeah, I can understand that. You know what the messed-up thing is? They promised that they got rid of him."

"Your mistake was revealing how much he annoyed you. The orcs will now do everything they can to keep Male Pregnancy just out of your sight, away from your notice. Their ability to offend your sensibilities feeds them as well."

"Great, so I better build up my Social Skills real fast too. How the hell am I going to do that, though?" Shiv glared down at the ground. It wasn't like he could just... "It's not like I can just kill myself after failing to convince someone of something. Can I? Will that work?"

"I doubt it," Valor said. "I suspect you won't get any skills from that at all, due to your death being self-inflicted, rather than a deficiency of capability. So, for now, you need a counterbalancing force. I will accompany you more. As long as you are within the Tutorial, I will be there with you. And I recommend you take Adam and Uva across as well, if possible."

"No," Shiv said reflexively. "Absolutely not. The orcs..."

"The orcs will target them regardless. Know that the moment you summoned the orcs, they were at risk. You cannot protect everyone. You cannot hide everyone from the orcs." Valor let out a slight scoff. "And here's another problem with you. We are Pathbearers. Our lives are brutal and dangerous. And worse yet, you are System-favored. You fear losing them. You fear watching people die. But people will die. You will lose people. You have avoided this lesson very well thus far. You have fought harder than most, have suffered extremes of torment, both physical and spiritual, to guard the ones you deem dear. And someday it will fall flat. It will. Someday it will not be enough."

"Yeah, we'll see about that," Shiv said. A great growl of defiance trailed at the end of his words, and Valor held up a calming hand.

"I know you will fight it. I expect you to be no other way. It is who you are, and that is a virtue. But we are only capable of so much, and those around you must be prepared as well. You wish to protect Adam? You wish to protect people inside this gate? Then they must be strong too. You and Adam are strongest together. Uva as well—but especially you and Adam. You make up for each other's deficiencies. He needs to be hardened more. And you, you require someone to watch over you, to notice what you cannot, to observe you from another perspective. You are insulated even from your own deaths. And this insensitivity has come as both a blessing and a cost to your development."

Shiv really, really didn't want to bring Adam over to the Tutorial for longer periods. Just thinking about exposing Adam or Uva—or anyone—to the orcs made him anxious, made his blood run cold with terror. But the more he thought about Valor's words, the truer they seemed. There was no turning away from the problem. The grayskins were here to stay. And if they were going to serve as Shiv's army, or at least a horde he could direct, then he needed to face the risks. Not just him. Adam, Uva, everyone. Everyone needed to face the risks of the blood rites.

Valor held out a single finger and lightly prodded Shiv on the forehead. The Deathless blinked. "What was that for?"

"That was me flicking you for being a stupid child."

"Oh, now I'm stupid."

"Yes, now you are stupid. Stupid in the way only a child can be. Because," Valor let out a disgusted snort, "Town Lord Roland Arrow has thought it best to cripple you, even non-martially. I suspect this was another means of keeping you contained in case you gained substantial powers in terms of combat."

Shiv sneered to himself. "I'm gonna kick that guy's ass so hard when I finally get my hands on him. I just need to get really close first and avoid all his felling arrows."

"Whatever the case," Valor poked Shiv in the head once more, "understand that you are not alone. If you are out of your depth, request advice. Do not simply throw yourselves at the orcs, or any problem, blindly. You may not have experience, but the rest of us do, and the rest of us will provide willingly."

"Alright," Shiv muttered. He felt a little bit like a chided child. This brought him back to Georges chewing him out for screwing up in the kitchen as a kid. It wasn't a feeling Shiv particularly liked. "I'm, uh, you know, sorry."

"Improve," Valor replied. "That is all you can do. Apologies mean some things to some people. But right now, you functionally remain at the social mercy of the orcs, and they are merciless creatures. So, do the mature thing. Do the wise thing. Get help."

"Yeah, yeah, okay. I was gonna have Uva guard my mind anyway."

"Get more help than just one person. More than just Psychomantic defense. You have a team. You have more than a team. Use them. Use the ones you can trust, that you have chosen to trust."

"Alright. Thanks, Valor."

"Good. That is all I have to say for now. I will continue observing. I may still be but a shadow of myself, but even a shadow has memories. Long, distant, but useful. Now, let's go to the Oubliette. I suspect the

others have already begun the interviewing of Master-Inquisitor Sijik. Hopefully, they aren't already done."

Shiv found Adam standing before a cell, staring through a translucent screen of Dimensionality. As he staggered closer, he saw that Uva, clad in her full arcanite armor, was seated at a table directly across from Sijik. Adam watched the interrogation unfold intently. His face was tight with focus, and his brow glistened with a sheen of perspiration. Nearby, Can Hu stood on watch as well. It noted Shiv and Valor first, offering them a slight incline of the body. Shiv gave a nod before he arrived beside Adam.

The Gate Lord didn't bother to look at him. His gaze was locked on the Master-Inquisitor—like he was the only person in the world worth looking at.

"How did it go?" Adam asked absentmindedly. "Did you manage to get the orcs to listen to you?"

"Something like that." Shiv coughed. "Listen, I probably need to tell you something about that in a bit. Once we're done with, well, whatever's happening here."

Within the cell, neither Uva nor Sijik spoke. Her mana strands were digging into his mind, and the Master-Inquisitor's face was a wall of stone. His forehead was furrowed with deeply etched wrinkles, and his nose looked like it had been broken one too many times ages ago and never properly set.

His eyes were dark onyx pits, and he studied his faceless interrogator. His lips almost curled in a sneer. Uva, comparatively, was like a statue, but one of her strands was still connected to Adam. Thus far, she hadn't noticed Shiv, and didn't connect her mind to his.

"Do you know who I am?" Sijik asked. His voice was hoarse, likely made that way by shouting orders during the ambush. Uva didn't respond. She continued working on his mind. "You will not find anything that way. My memories are shrouded from you, shrouded by the divine, by the finest Psychomancers who serve the Republic's glory."

Still, she said nothing, pulling at his thoughts. Sijik revealed a slight frown of discomfort, but he shook his head. "Fine then, waste your efforts. Debase yourself with this vile defilement. Know that you have marked yourself with death. Know that you will be punished for this. Punished for what you have done to my inquisitors, to my expeditionary force, to these loyal servants of the Ascendants."

Uva kept trying to crack his mind, but as the time dragged on, Shiv guessed that Sijik might be right, that she might actually be having difficulty.

"What's happening?" Shiv asked Adam.

"I'm not sure," Adam said. "It's a lot of complicated Psychomancy. I'm not exactly clear on what she's doing. She hasn't said anything mentally either for quite some time. She's entirely focused."

"I did not know that Compact hired orcs, that they had vile dealings with the accursed grayskins." Sijik spat on the table. His mouth was still wet with blood. Uva regarded the globule for only a moment, but kept to her silence. "Did that venomous cur Oldsmith warn you? Did that rusted thing of twisted machinery tell you of my coming? Was that it? Was all this its doing?"

Finally, Uva's mana strands broke free from Sijik's mind. The Inquisitor released a satisfied sneer. "I told you, your efforts are wasted. You cannot break a servant of the Ascendants, a servant of those truly

divine, who earned their divinity by trial and triumph. Move on to the physical torments if you like. Move on to anything, no matter how depraved. I have endured it all. I have faced it all. There is nothing you can do to me. Nothing!"

Uva stared at the Master-Inquisitor briefly before she finally spoke. "It was the Educator, actually."

Adam leaned in, squinting his eyes.

Shiv frowned. "What's she doing? Why's she telling him about the Educator?"

"I'm not exactly sure," Adam replied.

"The what?" Master-Inquisitor Sijik's face turned. He paled slightly, and his previous expression of defiance collapsed into a wide-eyed look of surprise.

"The Educator," Uva continued. "She is the reason we were prepared for you."

"You... no." The Master-Inquisitor shook his head. "No, that's impossible. You couldn't have possibly..."

"We were contacted by an Aviary liaison. Apparently, more than one group has an interest in securing Starhawk's Perch."

Shiv could see Sijik start to shake with anger. "Lies. Such naked and ridiculous lies."

Uva turned her head and stared straight at where Adam stood. "Bring the Owl."

Adam took a moment to respond, and then he shot off across the prison. He walked out of the current hall and went up a flight of stairs. A few minutes later, he returned with the Aviary Owl in chains. And for a brief moment, the former spy looked at Shiv, and a chain of fear surged into his body.

The Owl looked down, and his heart began to quicken. Shiv glared. Yeah, that's right. Stay scared.

He liked it when people were afraid of him. He liked it when he could bend people's will using fear. That might be something the orcs could exploit in me as well. Shit. Previously, I thought these were just personality traits or something. Now I gotta worry about this stuff too. Fucking orcs.

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Adam pushed the Owl through the dimensional veil, and he stumbled into the cell. Uva's mana strings speared straight into the Owl's mind. He recoiled for a moment, but then he bowed his head. And after, Sijik's jaws clenched tighter and tighter. Nothing was said, but Shiv realized she was transferring information across, information from the owl into the Master Inquisitor.

"Lies, lies, all of it. You... you have a gift for constructing personas. I see your—"

"But it is not a lie," Uva said coolly, calmly, without any defensiveness. The Master-Inquisitor bit his lip. He even flinched back as Uva leaned across the table. "Now, we want to talk. We want to discuss terms regarding Starhawk's Perch."

"The Perch is not yours to take," the Master-Inquisitor spat. "It is something that belongs to the Ascendants. To the Republic!"

"And what about Roland Arrow's life?" Uva asked. "What is worth more to you, the death of Roland Arrow or the Perch?" Adam's breath got caught in his throat, but Shiv was listening intently now.

"Both belong to the Ascendants!" Sijik said, slamming his fist down on the table. The steel desk dented inward. Uva simply leaned back, not bothered at all.

"So you say. Clearly not. Clearly, someone in your Inquisition has decided to strike a bargain to dispatch the Educator so that she could make a deal with New Albion. The Perch was an offering, but I want to know why." She briefly reached forward and tapped a single finger on the Master Inquisitor's wrist. "We wish to know, for our gate was attacked. Attacked by your rogue Educator, supported by Aviary with an army of vampires.

"You are being held here, Master-Inquisitor, not because Master-Advisor Oldsmith betrayed you. Though that is a factor. Though we do need to discuss the Animancy Core. No. You are here because one of yours has colluded with the First Blood to strike at Compact territory, to conquer this gate in the name of the Republic, the Ascendants, and the First Blood. All. We barely survived, and along the way, we received a warning that you were coming. Coming with a force too small to take our gate, yet just enough to serve as an occupying faction."

Sijik was dead silent, and so Uva continued. "So you must answer. Clean your voice of righteous indignation. We will return you to your Republic, but we have to wonder: if we deliver you directly back to the capital... Will they embrace you as a self-ransomed prisoner of war, or will they regard you as a traitor? You're compromised, Master-Inquisitor Sijik. You are not here in an official capacity, are you? Tell me, why have you betrayed your Republic? Why have you and the Educator allied with Aviary and the First Blood to steal a Sacred Phylacery?"

Chapter 147 (I) Confessions

Manipulation and confusion are the best tools to use when dealing with a reluctant prisoner. Psychomancy is a valuable option as well, but it requires a Psychomancer properly trained in informational extraction, and also that the prisoner has not had their minds or memories modified in any form or fashion. Torture should be disregarded entirely, unless used as a special interrogation technique to provoke someone to action.

The essentials for misdirection are as follows. First, it is best for your prisoner to be confused about your allegiance. This will allow them to reveal things they otherwise wouldn't to you. Second, make them think you know more than you already do. This way, they can easily let slip essential details, assuming that you already know about them.

From then on, make them paranoid. Make them think that some of their fellow prisoners have already spoken, have already betrayed their cause. Failing that, make them think that you don't believe them.

But above all, offer them a string of hope, the belief that they can be released, or a tangible goal they can work towards. A despairing prisoner is a prisoner willing to go to extremes. A hopeful prisoner will find that last shred of weakness in themselves and finally commit to a most personal betrayal.

-Aviary Training Course: "ENHANCED INTERROGATION"

"I am no traitor!" Master-Inquisitor Sijik shot up from his seat. His chair went flying behind him, slamming against the wall with a resounding clang. An eruption of ashen magic exploded out from his body—then shattered and rebounded back into him.

The inquisitor reeled back, and just then one of Uva's mana strands pierced his skull. He let out a shriek, and thereafter Sijik dropped, spasming, while Uva remained seated.

The Owl didn't move, but his expression was one of absolute dread. His eyes flicked between Uva and the twitching Master-Inquisitor, and Shiv watched the Aviary agent swallow. The Deathless nearly spiked himself into the cell, but Adam placed a hand on his chest. He pointed to a pair of manacles attached to the downed Inquisitor's legs.

"Focus-breaking enchantment," Adam said. "It's what the Umbrals usually apply to prisoners who are powerful magi."

After a few moments of shaking and shuddering, Uva ripped her strand out from Sijik's head, and the Inquisitor let out a wet cough. His eyes rolled. The smell of piss stained the air with a hint of putrescence.

"I have been exceptionally kind to you." Uva's voice was that of coldest winter. "And now I have remained kind. I have not broken anything essential in your mind. You are right. Whoever warded your thoughts and memories did an exceptional job. I cannot get to them, at least not immediately. I can, however, break the parts of you that remain. Nod, if you understand."

Sijik didn't nod. He simply spat on the ground and forced himself to stand. There was absolutely no fear in the man. His eyes were bloodshot with hatred. Rather than direct his ire upon Uva, he turned his miserable stare on the Owl.

"You," he growled out. "What lies have you been peddling? What falsehoods have you been spitting to spare your own cowardly existence?"

The Owl didn't say anything at first, but slowly his mouth opened. "I didn't lie about the Educator." And Shiv noted how strategic his words were. He also noticed several of Uva's mana strings draw taut within the Owl's mind.

"I think I kind of get what she's trying to do," Shiv said, folding his arms. "It's like she's trying to get the Inquisitor to reveal more than we actually know by pretending we're Compact and getting him confused." Adam's face scrunched into a relatively sour expression, but he didn't say anything for or against Uva's strategy.

"More lies!" the Master-Inquisitor roared. He turned a finger on Uva. "And you! Release his mind! Release his mind, and let us see if he speaks the same! Or better, send for your guards. Release me from your gate. I need only a moment on the surface to confirm my identity, to confirm—"

"You will do nothing," Uva cut him off. "You will do nothing except tell me what I want to know." Uva arose from her seat, standing a good head taller than the Master-Inquisitor. Sijik wasn't a large man, but something about him made Shiv think of a cornered dog, always on the verge of snapping. "We do not trust you, surfacer. We do not trust your Republic for what your people have done to us. For the transgressions that had been committed against both Compact and Lord Scorn. The orcs were merely a sampling of our power. We have an arrangement with the Challenger himself, an arrangement that will be unleashed against Fortress-City Diego, and your main force, should you not answer my questions."

"You wouldn't dare." Sijik's voice dropped to a vicious snarl. "You wouldn't dare! If you do this, then it is war between the surface and the Abyss. War!"

"War? You threaten me with war after attacking us, after we have already suffered casualties? After all that we have lost?"

Sijik's face contorted. "That was not us."

"Then who was it? I have a witness. I have memories from this Owl and your Educator." She let out a bitter chuckle. "She revealed many things to us. We know very little of the inner machinations of your Ascendants, and nor do we care. However, what does matter to the Lords of Law is our sovereignty? Our sovereignty, which has been offended. And so we want to know for what reason these transgressions were committed. You claim not to be in league with the Owl," she turned and faced the agent, "yet you worked with an agent of the Inquisition to breach your gate, didn't you?"

"Yes," the Owl said. A technical truth. Uva was covering all her bases, even against the prisoner.

"Lies!" Sijik roared. "Where is she now? Where is the Educator? I wish to talk to her. I wish..."

"There will be no speaking to the Educator," Uva sat back down, her posture relaxing. "Gate Lord Confriga has made sure of that."

Sijik's mouth fell open. His eyes grew wide. Shiv watched the man take two steps back, and the chain on his manacle drew taut. "That's not..."

"I assure you, it is very much possible, and it very much has happened. You can claim that we are lying to you and continue throwing your tantrum like a child. Or you can plead your case. You can make plain why you are here. Why your agent, if she truly is rogue, did the things she did."

Master-Inquisitor Sijik grimaced. "We are here to subdue a traitor to the Republic." Shiv saw Adam's fists clench in the corner of his eye. "We are not here to raid or take your gate. Think of this. My expeditionary force was only two thousand Pathbearers."

"Two thousand Masters, High-Adepts, and quite a few Heroes," Uva shot back. "That is substantial. That is a mighty force. It is enough to take a great many Towns."

"Gate Theborn is no Town!" Master-Inquisitor Sijik snarled. "We are no fools. I came here to retrieve one Master-Advisor Oldsmith, another traitor to our Republic. He was tasked originally with securing an Animancy Core." At his own mention of the core, Master-Inquisitor Sijik's eyes twisted. He looked at the corner of the room. "The Animancy Core, is it still here?"

Uva didn't answer. She leaned forward. "Continue about Oldsmith."

For a moment, it seemed like Sijik would remain quiet out of spite, but he proceeded, illustrating multiple points Shiv and Adam already knew. Oldsmith was the Republic representative placed in Gate Theborn. The Inquisition had a cell operating here, meant to hold potential dissidents and dangerous figures, Pathbearers deemed too risky to hold on their territories on the surface.

"Bastards," Adam snarled under his breath, but then Sijik continued on, and his revelations reached new territory.

"We came to stop Roland Arrow from starting a new war, a transgression that will drag the rest of the Republic into the very hells behind him."

Uva regarded him for a moment, letting the silence stretch. "What kind of war?"

"A war between the surface and the Abyss."

Shiv and Adam shared a glance.

"Elaborate," Uva said. "We have received no intelligence regarding Roland Arrow's intent to raid the Abyss." She let out a scornful laugh. "In fact, he seems to be relatively indisposed. Indisposed because Vicar Sullain is too busy trying to sack Blackedge in retribution for what happened to his Submission."

Sijik hesitated. There was something on the tip of his tongue that he wanted to say, but he wasn't sure about admitting.

Uva sighed. "No matter. If this is all you can say, then we will leave you here. You will remain for a time, and after that, we will send you back to the capital, along with a proper representative, where we will go over everything that has happened."

"He intends to make himself a god," Sijik finally spat. "He intends to invoke a Ritual of Remembered Ascension and claim part of a True God's power for himself, a right he has no right invoking, a divinity he is wholly undeserving of."

"True God?" Shiv asked. "The hell is he talking about?"

"The Composer is a True God," Valor said, his voice taking on a contemplative quality. "Though her power is limited, in the eyes of the System, she is truer than your Auroral Ascendants are. She did not ascend or gain power to reach her current state. She was divine by inception. What the Inquisitor claims is fascinating. To steal a god's power is more than unnatural—it requires one to defy the System itself. And often comes with brutal consequences."

"Why?" Shiv asked. Adam glared unblinkingly at Sijik beside him.

"Because it is not your story," Valor intoned. "An experimental Skill Transplant on this scale can only result in madness and destruction. The experiences and legends accumulated within the divine do not belong to you, and any attempts to brute-force an absorption will cause a volatile reaction on the soul level."

"But you said he was about to start a war," Uva continued, guiding the conversation back to coherence. "Why are we talking about Roland Arrow's desire for godhood?"

"These two things are tied," Sijik spät, scowling. "For years, he has operated in secrecy, serving the Starhawk." And Master-Inquisitor Sijik seemed impossibly awkward when speaking of the Starhawk. "He must have poisoned the mind of the Ascendant, or perhaps he has fooled the Starhawk. Regardless, they have gathered relics that do not belong to them, that should have been destroyed or kept hidden from the world."

"More Sacred Phylacteries," Uva finished.

Sijik swallowed. "The Republic's Sacred Phylacteries. These things were meant to be given unto the Ascendants for proper disposal and..." And Sijik stopped there. He didn't finish that sentence. "Instead, Roland Arrow has gathered them. He likely intends to descend into the Abyss soon, taking Starhawk's

Perch with him, down into the deepest depths of its darkness, so that the Ritual of Remembered Ascension can be performed."

Uva cocked her head at the Master-Inquisitor. "Ritual of Remembered Ascension? You mentioned it before. Elaborate."

"Do we know what that is?" Adam suddenly asked.

Shiv shook his head. "No idea."

"Yes," Valor replied with a sigh. The other three outside the cell looked at him. "The Ascendants had reached the deepest depths of the Abyss in the past. They managed to greet the heart of the Great One before they returned. A great many believe they performed a ritual to obtain their power—that they took something from the Great One. But all this is without definite proof, and my own memories regarding the Ascendants are lacking. But why would Roland descend with the Perch? With all the other relics? The Ascendants did not need to make an offering before. Something is missing from Sijik's explanation."

"And are you certain of this?" Uva asked after Sijik gave her a shortened version of what Valor had told them. "That Town Lord Roland Arrow truly seeks to do such a thing?"

"Of this I have no doubt," Inquisitor Sijik declared. He puffed his chest out. "The Ascendants themselves told me."

"But is the Starhawk not another one of your Ascendants?"

"He is," Sijik snarled. "He is merely... merely lost. His perfection has been tainted by human avarice, human deception, by Roland Arrow's vile tongue, and by love."

"Love?" Uva laughed. Her mocking chuckle earned her a reproachful glare from the Inquisitor.

"You insult me, but I speak true. The Starhawk cared deeply for Town Lord Arrow. He had shown him his favor for years, seeing him as a disciple, a faithful man. But the war against the Abyss..." Sijik closed his eyes. "It ruined things. It twisted the Town Lord. With his unlawful and brutal sacking of Submission, he lost his way. And we all paid for his avarice. Thanks to him, the brutality of the war continued on, costing the lives of so many sons, daughters, and automata of the Republic, and countless more Abyssals. Yet, despite this, despite the Ascendants having every right to punish him, the Starhawk intervened and protected his chosen Champion from any retribution. Love... love has undone one of my gods."

Now, it was Shiv holding Adam back from pushing his way into the cell. Shiv could practically feel the anger vibrating off the Gate Lord's flesh. "He spits nothing but lies and falsehoods," Adam snarled.

"Yeah. Maybe. But we want all his bullshit out first so we get a picture of just how felling insane he is. Or whatever we're missing."

Adam was practically rigid with anger. But the Deathless was fascinated by the conversation. Master-Inquisitor Sijik seemed entirely earnest and, on some level, kind of lost as to why he was actually doing this.

"And how do you know this?" Uva asked again.

"Because it came from the lips of an Ascendant," he snapped. "I told you!"

"Which Ascendant?"

"It was Kathereine, the Songbringer, who told me! She revealed herself, revealed herself to me, and to a few she trusted. A great scheme is unfolding, a grand conspiracy that is sweeping through the heart of my beloved Republic. And now I stand in this cell. I am castigated by an Abyssal. An abyssal I had no intention of facing, no intention of offending." Master-Inquisitor Sijik's lip curled, and a single tear fell from his eye. "And now my fellow inquisitors have given all, given all they have. Within the Ascendants' glory, they rest. But their deaths were unjust."

"Their deaths came as a consequence of an unneeded attack," Uva hissed. She put on a good play, pretending to be angered. But the Master-Inquisitor simply looked down.

"Contact City Lord Stormhalt. There is much he can tell you. There is much I am not at liberty to say, but I must beg you. I must swallow my jagged pride and beg. You must release me, and you must surrender the Animancy Core to my custody. It is the only way that things will end well, that things do not escalate. This is not a threat. This is me pleading, begging. This is me asking you to spare your own lives. Sullain is beyond control—a mad dog. I know that you do not wish for the surface to descend. Please... spare your own lives. Do not let people like me enter your homes."

The sheer passion in his words left Shiv speechless. It left Adam speechless as well. "It sounds like he actually believes all that shit," Shiv commented.

Uva drew in a long breath. "Should we give you the Animancy Core, what will you do with it?"

"We will use it to bring the travesty at Blackedge to a righteous end. We will use it to save what lives we can, subdue Roland Arrow, secure Starhawk's Perch, and satisfy Vicar Sullain while keeping him still controlled. We must take back the Perch, take back all Sacred Phylacteries that Roland Arrow has stolen. Then and only then can this crisis be brought to an end and a civil war be averted."

"And this civil war is to be caused by Roland Arrow's ascension to godhood," Uva asked.

"Godhood?" Inquisitor Sijik sneered. "No. Even if he gained the power of the Forgotten—" He he caught himself. "O-of the abandoned Sacred Relics, he cannot be a god. He will never be a god. No faith will flow towards him. He will not be elevated by our mana. He is not remembered by the System. He will never be remembered by the System. We will make sure to strike every memory of him from the record. He will be forgotten. Utterly. Completely."

"Remembered by the System?" Shiv muttered. He turned to Valor with a questioning look, but the Legendary Pathbearer stared through the glass with rapt attention as well.

"Forgotten like the other former Ascendants?" Uva breathed. Sijik's eyes widened.

Sijik looked at the Owl for a moment. "How do you know? What do you know?"

Uva leaned back. "A bit more than you think, I suspect. Your Educator told us much."

And for the first time, the Master-Inquisitor seemed scared. He fell to his knees and clasped his hands together. "Listen to me. Listen to me. I beseech you. I need to secure Blackedge. I need the core. I need to bring it back to City Lord Stormhalt. There is no more time. We cannot afford a civil crisis in the Republic, not now! We are surrounded on all sides by enemies. It is not only New Albion that gnaws at

us. The Atlantic, the Pacific, they are filled with nightmarish dangers held at bay only because they fear our Ascendants! The Dread North, choked by its eternal winter storm, batters at our doors, and the cruel fae carried in its wake are only held at bay by our Ascendants! South, where the orcs rage, and further south yet, where the blood-soaked empires of sacrifice run vast, constantly pushing outward, seeking slaves and sacrifices to sate their cruel serpent god, we have more enemies still!"

Sijik was outright crying now. Tears ran down his face, and Shiv and Adam stared at the scene, transfixed. "The Republic is forged of faith," he sobbed, "faith in our Ascendants! And it is all that spares our people from oblivion and damnation, that grants prosperity in strife!"

"It is not our faith," Uva said quietly, "and they are not my Ascendants."

"Oh, but we have kept you safe for so long," Sijik cried. "Without us, you would have been ravaged countless times over. Without us, the treaties do not stand, and if we are struck down, the rest of the surface nations will descend! You know my words ring true, Abyssal! They will march across the world with their armies millions strong, and they will flood down into the Abyss with nothing held back! They will butcher your peoples, and they will take what our Ascendants have once claimed, have guarded through treaty. They will take your Great One. Think of that. Be selfish if you cannot be noble, but make the right choice." And with those words finished, Sijik sagged. He looked two centuries older. His eyes were sunken, his face a mask of sweat and exhaustion.

Adam and Shiv stood frozen, and even Valor was entirely still. Uva briefly placed a strand against Sijik's mind, but then retracted it. She rose, and with a gesture of her hand, the Owl left the cell first. As he merged through the veil, Adam shaped a spell and let the Aviary agent through. A second later, Uva followed. Only after that did they slam the cell wall shut in place.

"Shiv," Uva said, slightly surprised. "You're here. When did you arrive?"

"Before either of you started talking." He looked in the direction of Master Sijik, who was currently huddled as a ball next to the wall of the cell, as far as his manacle would allow. His gaze was distant, and Shiv could practically taste the trauma radiating from the man's body.

"At minimum, he believes what he said," Uva said. "Every single word."

Chapter 147 (II) Confessions

"But—" Adam began.

Uva cut him off. "That doesn't mean he speaks the exact truth. The Master-Inquisitor strikes me as a zealot, and not nearly the one in charge of this entire affair. But Adam, he is absolutely convinced that your father seeks to become something of an Ascendant. A false Ascendant, perhaps, but still a divine being. He is also genuine in the love he holds for the Republic. He does not want to see Blackedge entirely destroyed, if he can help it. But above all, he wants Roland Arrow's body, and he wants Starhawk's Perch."

The Psychomancer paused. "And most worrying of all, he believes that everything he said about the Abyss and Great One is true as well. He truly thinks that Roland Arrow intends to bring the Perch down to the depths and perform some kind of ritual."

"That's just bloody madness," Adam spat. He gestured wildly at the Inquisitor. "The Perch—it's an entire castle. How is—it—this makes no sense. Maybe he believes this, but he is likely mad."

"Maybe," Shiv said. "Maybe he's missing some stuff. But we have no idea what the hells is going on between the Starhawk and the other Ascendants. From what the Educator said, it's like the Starhawk is trying to end their collective godhood or something. I don't know. Sounds like a big godsdamned mess to me."

The Gate Lord took everything, and he let out a long and shuddering breath. "Then we need to reach my father first. We need to start evacuations as soon as possible. And, we probably need to capture and speak to Lord Stormhalt, somehow, to learn more about what's going on from him. This Ascendant civil war gets more and more confusing the deeper we go. Katherine, the Songbringer, is no Ascendant of war. I cannot believe she would reveal such deception to the Master-Inquisitor."

Shiv grunted. "We don't know it was actually her, Adam. I mean, the Master-Inquisitor might believe everything he said, but he also seems to have a few screws loose up there."

Adam nodded, but both of them were avoiding some other possibilities. One being that the Master-Inquisitor wasn't wrong at all. That Roland genuinely intended to become a new Ascendant to fulfill whatever scheme the Starhawk had going. And what did that mean? What if Roland Arrow became an Ascendant?

Shiv's main concern there was that it might take a little while longer to get powerful enough to punch him in the face. But for Adam, for the Republic, what did that exactly mean?

"There's also the matter of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing," Valor said. Everyone turned to regard the Legendary Pathbearer. "The Master-Inquisitor seems in the dark about multiple things himself. He is following orders. Yes, he leads his own army, but he seems to be a zealot operating at the instructions of another: Stormhalt. And of a specific Ascendant. That, and his description of Roland Arrow bringing the Perch down to the Abyss is inconsistent with the lore of the Ascendants."

"Yes. I noted that." Uva let out a quiet hum. "Legend claims that they reached the Great One, but there is no detail about them giving specific offerings."

"Well. Can someone refund stored divinity or something?" Shiv asked. Everyone stared at him. He cringed. "Okay. Maybe kind of a stupid—"

"No," Valor said. "There might be something there. Refunded divinity... Or restored divinity. But this is not something we can be certain about. It is also not something the Master-Inquisitor knows. I am personally more concerned about Katherine. It seems all that has happened is tied to her directly. There is every possibility that this is a personal feud between two Ascendants, with the others drawn in."

"It can't be just her if we're entertaining the Ascendants being rogue," Adam said. "City Lord Stormholt is favored by Halsur, the Endbreaker. Halsur is married to Katherine, so perhaps they stand against the Starhawk for some reason. The Educator said a great many things, but... some aspects still don't make sense."

"Like how the Republic isn't just rushing for Blackedge if Roland was actually doing something like that," Shiv commented. "This is probably extreme heresy or something. And the Starhawk trying to remove the divinity of the other Ascendants should have them all trying to finish him immediately, right? But it feels like they're just dragging things out."

"Yes... Or not unified on how to resolve the matter." Adam frowned. "I suspect the Ascendants are not of one mind. This might be why only a small group of the Republic is operating against Blackedge. Right, perfect. So. There might still be a few Ascendants that aren't entirely evil. But we might have to fight Kathereine and Halsur..."

"Well, if we do, you can just shoot me with a Necromantic arrow," Shiv said, half-jokingly. Then he paused. "Actually, Adam, maybe if they are, we can literally just send one of my Vitae golems, then you can shoot it with Necromancy. It lit up the thing controlling the Educator. Might work on the actual Ascendants."

The Gate Lord stared at Shiv for a moment. "Do you understand how much collateral damage that might cause?"

"That's why we blow it up in the right place. Or, I don't know, you figure out a dimensional pocket. Then we blow it up inside there."

"A dimensional pocket that can trap a god," Adam said flatly.

"Yeah, you know, just think back to one of your classes at the Chicken Academy. They must have taught you god-trapping. Or did you skip that one?"

The Deathless and the Gate Lord just stared at each other. Then Adam cracked. He hid his smirk as he punched Shiv in the arm. "You irreverent bastard. Alright, well, I suppose we'd best keep him here for now." Adam hesitated. "Maybe it would be good if I—"

"No," Uva cut Adam off. "We don't want him to know you're here. You are Adam Arrow. He wouldn't have revealed half as much to us if he knew you were here. The only reason he revealed so much just now is that he thinks we are Compact. He thinks that we do not have a direct stake in this struggle. That we are merely an aggrieved third party."

"Yeah, I kinda figured that was why you were doing the whole misdirection thing," Shiv said.

"Indeed. It would be best if we left the inquisitor in his cage for a while. Let him recover. His mental state is fragile as is. I will resume questioning some other time. Meanwhile, we should pursue other avenues of intelligence gathering and proceed with the liberation of Blackedge as soon as possible. I

suspect that with the destruction of the Expeditionary Force, the bulk of City Lord Stormhalt's army will be moving on us."

"It's not a small army," Adam said, "but the orcs outnumber them many times over."

Uva hesitated, biting her scarred lip. "I managed to glean something else from Sijik's mind. I think they have a Legendary Pathbearer with them."

Adam stopped breathing for a moment. "A Legend."

"Correct," Uva said. "I only managed to get a faint glance into his memories before I was pushed back. No names. Sijik's mind is too well shrouded. But... the person I saw resembled a very small human girl bearing an extremely large sword."

"Was the sword rusted?" Adam immediately asked, his pupils dilating.

"I... Yes. I do recall some rust. Why?"

"Ah, shit," Adam muttered.

"Do... do you know who that is?" Shiv asked.

"Yes. It's Jessica Hawgrave. Titansbane."

Shiv paused. "The hell is a Titansbane?"

Adam stared at him, incredulous. "You've never heard of Jessica Hawgrave? Wait, do you not know her husband? Jackie Hawgrave? Mad Atlas? The martyred hero who died guarding our Eastern Seaboard? Who carried an entire city to safety on his back during the Jotunn Invasion? The author of the Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage series?"

Shiv stared.

The Gate Lord closed his eyes and almost scoffed. "Godsdammit, father. We could have had an educated Omenborn at least."

"Oh. Now you're bothered on my behalf?" Shiv muttered.

"Yours? I'm annoyed on my own behalf!" Adam snorted. "I need to explain everything to you. It's exhausting. But—look; simply put, Titansbane is a True Legend that has been known to crush Jotunn and fae cities flat with her sword. Or her foot. If she's actually on the field, we might be felling—" Adam squinted. "No. We might have someone to sic on Sullain. If we can engineer a proper clash between Stormhalt's forces and the Necrotechs."

"I don't know, Adam," Shiv said. "Sullain doesn't seem like someone that anyone can take alone."

Valor chuckled at that. "Shiv. Sullain is known to be a comparatively harmless Legend."

The Deathless went still. "Comparatively harmless?"

"Yes. Sullain is a soft-willed scholar more than anything. His genius brought him far, but his lacking fortitude has always laid him low." Valor let out a breath. "Always a paradoxical Pathbearer, that one. He should have never become a Legend in my opinion. And I should have never saved his life from the Semper Paragon. I wish I could remember why I did these things..."

As Valor trailed off, Adam bit his lip. "Shiv. The orcs. Are they ready for another task? We will need some of their Shadows and Psychomancers to engineer something between the Inquisition and Necrotechs as soon as possible. There are multiple objectives we need to accomplish. We need to save Blackedge, repel the Necrotechs, capture Stormhalt, and figure out just what in all the hells is happening between the Ascendants. And I think we can achieve all those goals at once if we can make sure all the key characters are in the same place."

"The orc Psychomancers are already planning to do some shit with the surviving inquisitors they decided to keep, so I think they're ahead of us on that," Shiv said.

"Good. Then—wait, did they finish the other Inquisitors? And what about your talk? How did that go?"

"Yeah, so about that," Shiv coughed awkwardly. "Look, I managed to get the orcs to agree to something, right?"

"Right," Adam said, waiting for the other shoe to fall.

"But, uh, well, they did kill the Inquisitors. Reasonably ethically. Sorta. And they told me they won't hurt anyone who isn't a Necrotech or a vampire. Mostly." Shiv continued tumbling through his excuses, and finally decided, "Look, Adam, they bribed me. And, uh, yeah, I might have gotten influenced by the orcs. Realized that when Valor talked to me after. The orcs still agreed to some stuff. But, uh... Yeah. Talk was really more of them influencing me instead of the other way around."

The Gate Lord just stared at Shiv. Uva facepalmed her helmet. Shiv swallowed as he prepared to get chewed out again.

But that wasn't what happened.

"This is my bloody fault." Adam sighed. "I should have seen this coming."

Shiv blinked. "I could have just said no. Been more—"

"You have no true Social Skills besides Intimidation," Uva cut in. "Your Silver Tongue is underleveled. Your Psychology is underleveled. You have no concept of what a Social Skill might do to you. We should have been there. Adam is right."

"Yeah, well, you were surface-sick, and Adam was getting mind-gamed by the orcs too."

“Yes,” Adam agreed distastefully. “Which is why I should have been there. If they can influence me, it should be no surprise that they could compromise you easily. Which was their strategy. To unnerve me enough so that I leave you alone.”

“It is never too late to seek a new patron...” Uva's voice sounded from inside her helmet, a melodious inflection to the words. Everyone turned to stare at her.

“That was the Dreamtaker,” Uva said under her breath. “Ignore her.”

“Think of my colors.”

Adam shuddered. “Well. We can figure this thing out. But no more talking to the orcs alone.”

“Yeah,” Shiv agreed. “I got that from Valor. But. Look. I’m—uh. I’m scared.” He grunted with discomfort at the admission, but he pushed through. “I’m scared shitless that the orcs might hurt you guys and that I won’t be able to, you know. Yeah. So.” Adam and Uva shared a look. Can Hu’s optics flashed at Shiv. “I get that we can’t avoid risking our lives—that the System will keep coming for us. But the orcs will use it against me. I’m certain of that.”

“Then we will need to prove too dangerous for them to target,” Uva said coolly, putting a hand on her hip. “But... do tell me more about how you worry for us. I like hearing it.”

“I worry about some more than others,” Shiv noted.

"It's not a weakness either," Adam said. "The orcs don't care about each other. They won't respond when one of their own is in danger. We stand together. We can make up for what the other lacks. They will always stand apart. But more importantly, I think... your fear can be used to our advantage. As bait for their cruelty, and a means of punishing them."

"How?" Shiv asked.

"The orcs have a crippling weakness too," Adam said. "They need to be cruel. They need to scratch. They cannot resist it for long. So. We just need to ask ourselves what the most cruel thing they can do against us is. And then we prepare accordingly."

And already, Shiv felt a bit less worried than before. It's good to have people behind you.

"They bribed you," Uva said, turning to him and tilting her head curiously. "With what?"

"Please don't tell me it's mithril," Adam said with a wince. "Shiv. If you did it for money—"

The Deathless pulled the Husk of the Voidmantid out of his cape, and both Uva and Adam cocked their heads, Uva doing it in the opposite direction as before. Can Hu took two steps forward.

"Is that organic armor?" Adam said, squinting.

"Husk of the Voidmantid," Uva commented.

“Master-Tier,” Can Hu noted with disgust. It looked up at Shiv. “You sold yourself too cheaply, Pathbearer. I was also unaware that you were seeking a new chassis.”

Shiv winced. “I—uh, Can Hu, look—”

“It will serve for now,” Can Hu continued. “But not forever. Time. Time is my ally. I will recover thanks to you. And the armor will break and die because of you. And I will still be here.”

Shiv did a double-take as Can Hu started making him nervous. Shit. If I knew getting a new piece of armor would make Can Hu act like a jilted lover, I would have thought twice.

“It’s still damaged, though,” Uva said.

“Good enchantments for Shiv,” Adam muttered. “Regeneration. And a lot of Awareness-boosting abilities. Finally. He won’t be near-blind on the battlefield anymore.”

“Thanks, asshole,” Shiv replied. “Helix said something like that too. But in a real salesman kind of way.”

“Helix?” Adam asked.

“The relatively small orc with the glasses,” Shiv explained. “I was going to go see him after we finished here. So I could continue my Biomancy training and fuse this armor with what I’m wearing right now.”

“A fleeting act,” Can Hu whispered.

“Yeah... Sure, Can Hu... Anyway. Helix wants me to get a Crafting Skill through Biomancy. Maybe I might be able to make more organic armors of my own in the future. Or weapons. Something like that.”

Adam nodded slowly. “Well, then. I suppose we should all pay Helix a visit.”

“We?” Shiv asked.

“Yes, all of us,” Uva said, voice bright and cheerful. “Together. I, too, am suddenly interested in Biomancy.”

“So am I,” Can Hu hissed.

“I love learning,” Adam commented. He slowly grinned. “I very much love learning. Let us all get educated together.”

Chapter 148 (I) Skin

We lived through a lot of stuff together. A lot of it wonderful. A lot of it terrible. Eighty years. Eighty beautiful years. Three kids. 1244 campaigns. Three worlds. Many dimensions. We lived lifetimes compared to most people. We worked miracles and faced nightmares.

And it wasn't enough for the System. It was never enough. And now it will never be enough. Never again.

I love you, Jackie.

I'll always love you. And a part of me died with you in my arms.

But I suppose there's no way out of it.

There is no forever. Sooner or later, we all get cut down.

Let that be the final lesson of his Memoirs.

You don't get to finish your own tale. Someone else will write your final lines. And then they'll fall too. Our stories don't belong to us. Pathless to Legend, we're all just food in the end.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage (Final Chapter)

Shiv let out a final breath as he regarded the black static veil of the Tutorial Gateway. Every beat of his heart was like an explosion going off within his chest. He regarded the others once more and clamped down on his nervousness.

"If you're going to ask us to back out, you can forget about it," Adam said. He was sweating slightly, and his heart was beating fast too. He was likely more nervous than Shiv was. The Gate Lord didn't get along well with the orcs, but even so, he insisted on accompanying Shiv. And Shiv found that touching, though he would never admit it to Adam.

He and the Young Lord had come a long way since they first descended into the Abyss.

Uva, Can Hu, and Valor comparatively betrayed little of their anxiety. But Shiv had been with Uva long enough to tell that she was on alert. Her posture was stiff. She had practiced drawing a short sword earlier, indicating a preparedness for violence. And she kept the group mentally connected to each other, like they were prepared to enter a battlefield. Luckily, they weren't getting ready to enter a battle, but rather to receive a Biomancy lesson. With the orcs, however, both of those could be one and the same.

"Shiv," Valor called. "Remember this. Clinging to a worry does not stop it from coming to pass. Anxiety is not easy. Our fears are true. But if you cannot solve them, it is best to act, rather than wait and be forced to react."

And that was the final bit of incentive Shiv needed. He stepped forward, splashing into the veil of Dimensionality. And the world grew tight with pressure as he transitioned across dimensions. In an instant, he arrived in the Tutorial. However, the sight that greeted him wasn't what he'd expected.

Previously, the Tutorial Gateway was built upon a tall ziggurat, one that overlooked a wide expanse. Shiv expected to see orc encampments running in every direction, campfires casting trails of smoke high up

into the air, the Court Leviathan hanging just above. Instead, he was in a teleportation anchor. One that already had most of its internal spellwork completed.

"What in the hell is this?" Adam muttered, about as surprised as Shiv was.

Uva stared at the spellwork and let out a quiet scoff. "They're mocking us."

Shiv turned to look at her. "What?"

"We've installed teleportation anchors and checkpoints on our side of the gateway. They're doing the same to mock us."

"Oh, hello there, Insul," Tequila's voice suddenly sounded. "I didn't realize you were going to be arriving so soon." Unlike with Ikki, however, his voice was projected through a series of spells. "We put up some magical precautions and added a checkpoint on our end just in case you feel unsafe. We know all about safety here in the Tutorial."

Thankfully, Shiv could hear the orc snickering to himself.

"Great, you've had your fun," Shiv said with a faint sneer, "let us through."

"Just a moment, we're scanning you for any dangerous pathogens. Also, when was the last time you took a shower? I'm reading a great amount of germs and filth on your body."

Shiv folded his arms and frowned. "Yeah, like you guys shower."

"We do," Tequila said. "We have Hydromancers here who make clouds for us. A great deluge comes, and we stand in the open, scrubbing each other with the most voluminous bars of soap you might see across ten dimensions. Some of us find it very sensual."

Part of Shiv suspected the orc was bullshitting him. Unfortunately, this also sounded like something the orcs might actually do.

The surrounding spells flashed one final time, and a hiss of air spilled into the teleportation anchor. A few moments later, it opened up, and Shiv was surprised for a second time. Most of the encampments were gone, and in their place were a series of small forts. Heavy, dome-shaped buildings rose from the ground and were connected to each other through a network of trenches. Atop the dome-shaped buildings were a series of large-barreled mortars. They slightly resembled the weapon Mortar carried on his back, and Shiv guessed that was no coincidence either. The only thing that was consistent with before were the rancid sky and the Court Leviathan hanging high above.

"What the hells is this?" Shiv muttered.

"Oh," Tequila said, greeting Shiv on the other side with both arms clasped behind his back. "We decided to do some renovations of our own, make some upgrades, since we are going to be dedicating our service to..." Tequila waved a hand. "Do you have a name for the gate yet? It's important to name things. I would be deeply, deeply sad on your behalf if you didn't name the gate. That would indicate a great state of overwork."

Shiv stared at Adam from the corner of his eye. "Yeah, you know, I'm not calling it Gate Arrow."

"It's the best name we have," Adam insisted.

"It most certainly is not," Uva interjected.

"Well, I don't see you two coming up with a name. And we're not naming it Shiv or Mettabon."

"I did come up with a name," Shiv reminded Adam. "I called it Gate Asshole."

"Piety," Can Hu suddenly suggested. All eyes turned on the Penitent.

"Gate Piety," Tequila said, testing the name on his tongue. He smacked his lips. "Interesting."

"Piety," Adam echoed.

"Correct," Can Hu said. "I believe that is what you three were most likely mentally arguing about."

Shiv stared at the automaton for a moment. "And you knew we were arguing?"

"It's the facial expressions, mostly," Valor answered on Can Hu's behalf.

"Why Piety?" Shiv asked.

"Because Adam's current actions are most pious. He is dedicating a great deal of effort to saving his father and his people. That, and the threat that faces us is one connected to faith. I believe this makes Piety a suitable name for now. It could be changed later if we have a better idea, or we can adopt Gate Arrow for convenience. If the name truly displeases, I can continue brainstorming. I will not be offended if my suggestion is rejected."

Shiv looked at Adam. "Piety," Adam repeated. "I like it. A quite tasteful name. Very well. Gate Piety it is," Adam declared confidently to Tequila.

"Piety," the orc muttered, then slowly he grinned. "But I think Gate Prodigal might sound better. Wouldn't you agree, Penitent?"

"As in a son returning home," Can Hu mused. The automaton slowly turned to a glowering Adam, but considered the orc's word for a moment. "Partially suitable. However, the conflict goes beyond just the Gate Lord himself."

"Oh, so you take in all the context. Very good," Tequila said. The look on his face suggested that his compliments were genuine. He gestured with a hand, welcoming the group into the Tutorial. "Whatever the case, our good friend Helix is waiting for you aboard the Court Leviathan, Insul. But there are several other Maestros that require your attention. Bonk wishes to see you to continue your previous training. The Amnesiac wishes to talk with you regarding the prisoners and how best to spend their lives. He and the other Psychomancers have some funny things planned. Mortar wants to talk about campaign strategies and enemy hardpoints at Los Angeles. And you have a challenger."

"A challenger?" Shiv asked. "What kind of challenger?"

"Nothing martial," Tequila said, waving him off with a laugh. "No, an orc cook known as BBQ-39999 wishes to see how skilled you are in the kitchen." The orc placed a large hand beside his lips and whispered to Shiv, "I might have talked your skills up a little."

"BBQ, huh? Well, I think I'm going to go say hi to him later." Despite everything, this got Shiv a little excited. "Hey, listen, do you have any other cooking Maestros around here?"

"Plenty," Tequila said with a smirk, "but a great deal of us are oh so shy. BBQ was among the braver of the bunch. After you have an exchange with him, perhaps the others will be more willing to come out of their shells and hidey-holes."

"Alright then, I think I'll get to him after all the actual work gets done."

"And your companions?" the orc asked, looking over the others following Shiv. "Will they be joining you?"

"Yeah," Shiv replied, trying to keep any hint of nervousness out of his voice. Even so, Shiv caught a glint in the orc's eye.

"Wonderful. Contrary to what you may believe, we orcs do love more company. Especially from such an esteemed Pathbearer as you, oh great Valor. Even this broken, diminished version of you."

"Your compliments are received, Tequila," Valor said in return. "Which reminds me, have you seen my nemesis recently? It has been some time since they have come to make an attempt on my life."

And for the first time, Tequila's expression flickered a little. Shiv noticed a hint of unease creep through the orc's expression. "Not quite yet. He should still be making his way out of the Cage of Existentiality."

"Yes," Valor said with a vigorous nod. "I have full confidence that he will develop the morality, remorse, and sympathy needed to escape from the final trial. If not soon, then at least within the next thousand years."

Shiv blinked. "The hell did you do to your nemesis?"

"It is not what I am doing to him, Shiv." Valor sighed. "What he is doing to himself, and what the itch is doing to him, after a good few centuries of nonviolence."

"Doesn't that kill an orc?"

"In most cases. Alas, the Cage of Existentiality does not wish for you to die. It is a place where many Pathbearers can go to discover themselves, if they have the means to access it, of course. Or if they are thrown in by someone else." Valor's final few words developed an edge, and Tequila shuffled backward slightly.

"Now, now, let's not keep our dear Helix waiting," the orc said with an awkward chuckle. "He has been very patient."

"I did not expect you to bring company with you, Insul," Helix said, eyeing Valor in particular.

The bridge of the Court Leviathan was livelier than ever. For the first time, Blood Horrors wandered the interior, but they had been modified. Their bodies were larger than human. They resembled misshapen orcs, but rather than being clones, their bodies sprouted brutal tumors that coated their flesh. Their limbs were also branching lengths of sinew, red teeth, and jutting bones sticking free like natural weapons. Most of all, their heads were disfigured. Their mouths, eyes, and ears were all in the wrong place.

Uva regarded the abominations with a hint of disgust, and her body language went from one of reserved readiness to active resistance. It took a great deal of effort on her part to restrain herself from attacking any of the Blood Horrors.

"The hell is this, Helix?" Shiv asked. He gestured at the Blood Horrors, at the many orcs now completely fused with the Court Leviathan's inner walls. The bridge itself had been changed as well. Rather than the regal throne room the vampires had, the orcs had grown a series of pods along the ground, orc-sized pods that certain Biomancers lay in, interfacing with the great leviathan. Strange, sinuous organs were attached to their eyes, their ears, and even their skin.

"This," Helix replied, "is simply us restoring the Court Leviathan to its full potential. You understand why it takes so many Biomancers to pilot one Court Leviathan? Because its flesh is complicated. Everyone has different stations and organs to manage. Alas, it doesn't need to be this way." The orc crinkled his nose in disgust. "The Court Leviathan's many brains have far fewer furrows than they should have. They could

have made this creature very intelligent, yet it is simple. But that is the way of the vampiric parasite, to create dependency. For that's the world they know, dependency from top to bottom."

"Sounds like the vampires," Shiv grumbled

"Utterly inefficient is what it sounds like," Helix criticized. "Whatever the case, I have also taken the liberty of refurbishing your quarters."

"Oh, you know my living preferences, huh?" Shiv asked.

"Don't be absurd, Insul. You have barely any living preferences. Or at least you're only currently developing living preferences. Your behavior screams feral street urchin more often than not. And your personal belongings... Well, the only belonging you seem to treasure is that blade you have. Not the one you use in combat. The one you use to cook."

Shiv stared at Helix for a long moment. "Helix, I'm just going to ask you a single question. Is there a kitchen inside the room?"

"The room is a kitchen," Helix replied as if it were natural. "That's the only thing that you truly treasure aside from the knife, isn't it?"

Shiv let out a long sigh. "I'm obvious as shit."

"Don't worry. It's not so bad, being simple."

"It will be bad for you, specifically, if you continue playing mind games with him," Uva said, not bothering to hide the malice in her voice.

Helix looked down at the armored Umbral. He squinted for a moment and adjusted his spectacles before he finally smirked. "Ah, yes. The pale elf. So, Insul, you've finally grown bold enough to—"

"My presence was not decided by him," Uva continued, "only agreed upon. And should you persist in your social manipulation, I'm going to discover what you find dearest to you. Your Biomancy knowledge, for instance. And I'm going to start peeling pieces away."

Helix's mouth fell open a little.

"Not major pieces," Uva continued. "Just small pieces. Small enough that it will inconvenience your work, force you to relearn things, rather than experience damage altogether. I understand that Practical Metabiology cannot be undone by memory loss alone, but it can be negatively affected if your instincts point one way, and you are missing all the proper experiences to guide it."

Both Shiv and Helix stared at Uva. Holy shit, Shiv thought. I forgot how terrifying Psychomancy could be sometimes. That, and he was beginning to feel a flame in his gut.

"Yes, well," Helix pushed his spectacles up along the bridge of his nose, "there's no need for such coarse coercion. I was merely showing how attentive I am to the Insul's habits. Now, Shiv, the armor."

"Yes," Can Hu said suddenly. It took two loud steps forward, joints letting out faint creaks. "Show us the armor. Show me how good this armor can be."

Helix let out an exasperated scoff. "Insul, are all of your companions going to be here the entire time? We don't need a peanut gallery. It's not conducive to learning."

"But that is not what we are here for," Valor said, splaying his arms out. "We are also prospective students. Shiv has told us a great deal about your skill. We wish to learn too. And we want to see how good you really are at Biomancy."

The orc glared at the Legendary Pathbearer, and then he turned the same glare on the rest of Shiv's group. "Very well, then; a demonstration."

Chapter 148 (II) Skin

Shiv produced his Husk of the Voidmantid and a spare set of adamantine bone armor. The merging was conducted within one of the Court Leviathan's internal rooms, now repurposed into a practice chamber. Shiv stood across from Helix as the orc connected the Husk of the Voidmantid with the adamantine armor using strings of helix-shaped blood infused with the faint glow of Biomancy mana. "Observe closely," Helix intoned. "Feel what I'm doing using your Biomancy."

Shiv extended one of his mana hydras, and immediately, his Biomancy clashed against Helix's. However, the two pieces of armor lit up as spell renderings. A complex array of micro-spells and interconnected patterns danced across his vision. Shiv tried to take in all the details, but it was like trying to remember every star in the night sky. Without further increases to his memorization, he wouldn't be able to properly recall what pattern was found where. And without Practical Metabiology, he didn't know what they represented anyway. However, he did know that the parts that were alight could merge together far more easily than the parts that weren't. And right now, most of the micro-spells he saw were glowing.

"They're glowing because of the Basilisk biomass." Helix pointed at Shiv's bone armor. "The inclusion of regeneration, natural bio-electrically guided regeneration at that, was a wise decision. Among the wisest you could make when it comes to creating a biological construct. Do you know why that is?"

"I'd assume you're going to explain that to me," Shiv said.

"Have a guess first."

Shiv considered his basilisk-infused armor for a moment. "It regenerates, and it can maintain its form. Maybe it's something to do with the bio-electricity that makes different organic parts and tissues come together better. It has something of an innate intelligence."

"Yes," Helix said, "innate intelligence."

That wasn't what Shiv had expected. "So what, you're saying that the biology has smartened itself?"

"I'm saying that every cell in your body, every little organism, no matter how microscopic, that makes up a larger organism, is part of a system. And the system likely has intelligence unto itself, such as why we call it a system. It is an organized pattern, so to speak, or it has patterns to its organization."

Immediately, that made Shiv think about the System itself. The System that gave him all his skills, that empowered everyone, that engineered so much conflict across the vastness of Integration. So, just how micro of an organism am I? Shiv mused.

"And because of the bioelectricity, which technically allows different cells to communicate with each other and know what the optimal state for them to be is, that avoids replication errors, drifting, mutations, if you will, they can be merged with other structures, so long as the basilisk flesh isn't rejected. And there," Helix moved to the few parts of the spell, the few patterns that didn't glow, "parts like these, they need to be adapted. As both of these armors have regeneration, one must supersede the other. The basilisk's regeneration is natural, albeit slower. I would say I prefer that, rather than the enchantment."

Shiv paused. "Why not the enchantment?"

"Because the enchantment regeneration also includes immunological defenses. Immunology is an entirely separate structure of your body. Right now, your immunology has been addressed, dramatically boosted by your Plaguefueled skill."

"Huh," Shiv said. "So, any disorders my body develops will be removed by my immune system."

"Yes." The orc frowned for a beat. "However, I am slightly offended by how the System classifies the skill. It seems to regard it more as a physical skill, rather than a knowledge-based one. Although I suppose that's accurate. It is, after all, a bastard cousin to Toughness and Magical Resistance."

"So, are we going to remove the regeneration enchantment?"

"No." The orc laughed. "Challenger no. It would be such a waste. Instead, we are simply going to avoid connecting those two parts. And you will be wearing a dual-layered armor. It will make it immensely heavier, but..." Helix looked Shiv up and down. "Weight doesn't seem to bother you."

"Frankly, I'd like more weight sometimes," Shiv replied. "And if it does get too heavy, I'll just drain it using my knife."

"Good," Helix said. "Very good. Now, I will guide you through the process. Follow me, do what I do, and, if you can, intuit the reasons why."

The orc began without preamble. More strings of blood shot between the armor and drew them close. Shiv watched as connections began to build between specific spell patterns. He pushed them together as well, trying to replicate what Helix did. But where Helix flowed in his Biomancy, assembling the two armors together on a magical level, Shiv worked in stutters and stops, trying to keep up with what Helix was doing.

Both armors glowed blood-red now, completely suffused by mana.

Through the nearby observation window, the rest of the group looked on. Can Hu stood at the center, its piercing green optics pressed against the transparent material separating the two rooms. Helix made a gesture, and Shiv watched as certain spell patterns began to shift. They turned like wheels and glided from the insides of the armor's overarching structure until they were outside.

The Voidmantid armor began to shift, parts of it twisting and unfurling. It ceased to retain its original damaged form. At the same time, Helix rearranged parts of the bone adamantine armor. However, instead of rearranging it biologically, he did it physically. He shifted a few of the plates out of the way, adjusted some bones, widened the eyes, and generally made the armor bigger. And then the orc Biomancer gestured at Shiv. "Connect that which glows."

Shiv hesitated for a moment, then used his Aegis of Assimilation to consume both armors. As soon as he did, he merged their memorized spell patterns and locked the Voidmantid within his adamantine bone armor. As they were formed together, Shiv felt something pulse inside his being. He grinned as a faint feeling of triumph washed through him.

Equipment Obtained: [Husk of the Adamantine Voidmantid]

Tier: Master

Condition: Fine

Composition: Voidmantid Ceramic; Bloodroach Chitin; Deepcrawler Silk; Fleshdrinker Fungi; Bone Adamantine

Enchantments > Compound Ocular Network; Antennal Resonance; Pheromonic Cipher; Master Regeneration; Magnified Vibrosense; Trauma Mantle; Myomeric Amplification; Mycelial Interface; Binding

Skill Gained: Crafting 1 (Initiate)

Most of it had been Helix's effort, guiding him through every step, but he had done it. He'd gained a crafting skill.

"Well," Shiv said, "looks like I'm a crafter now too."

A faint mechanical shriek sounded from the observation room. Can Hu's head was pressed hard against the glass-like material. Shiv winced, but Helix ignored the Penitent. "Very good. Now you've taken your first step into being more than a blunt weapon."

"My first step?" Shiv said. "All that learning wasn't the first step?"

Helix threw his head back and laughed, but there was no viciousness in the laughter, only the kind of amusement a master might show towards an ignorant pupil. "Life is an endless series of first steps, as is learning. My advice to you, Shiv, is to learn to love first steps. If you know how to love progress for progress's sake, for the joy of learning itself, no matter what the System takes from you, it will not be able to break you. Enjoy the climb because you get to climb, not because you want to arrive somewhere." The orc paused for a moment. "All can be taken, but all can be regained. That is the beauty of being a Pathbearer."

Shiv took those words in, and immediately after, he realized why he hated the orc so much. It was because of moments like this. Because they were capable of profundity. Because they were capable of insight, wisdom, and inspiration. But they were trapped inside themselves, unable to overcome the monsters they had been made to be. "I'll keep that in mind," he whispered.

Shiv projected his new armor outward, and as it materialized in a flash of red, he took a single step back to better gaze upon his newly augmented equipment. His new armor resembled the bone adamantine exoskeleton he typically wore, more than the mantid itself. However, strings of muscular tissue ran along its joints and down its limbs. Dense chitinous fibers formed a protective weave between each of the ribs. And atop the bone adamantine was a new layer of ossified material, that crystalline carapace Shiv had seen on the Voidmantid armor.

There were also two antennae sprouting free from the shoulders. They rose in the air and twitched slightly. They reminded Shiv of the appendages jutting from a bug's head. And the eyes were changed as well. No longer did he have open sockets. Instead, there were two white lenses lodged in place, compound lenses with hundreds of small eyes. Once again, quite like an insect's. Now the armor adopted a darker, faintly green hue as well. And as Shiv placed a hand on it, he felt it warm to his touch, responding to tactile sensation.

"Well, that doesn't look half bad," Adam commented.

The Penitent immediately wheeled on him. "There are several flaws," Can Hu began. "It also looks incredibly aesthetically displeasing, especially around the eyes. Moreover, it will not be able to serve him in desperate combat situations. The armor does not have an augmented intelligence suite."

"No," Helix said, "but it should augment his intelligence in place of his awareness. He'll be able to notice things from further away now. Could he do that with you, Penitent?"

"Yes," Can Hu nearly shrieked. "Yes! I have high-definition optics! I can see across multiple spectrums of color!"

"You could or you can right now?" Helix asked. Can Hu went quiet. The Biomancer let out a brief chuckle. "So you see, his current armor is superior in terms of quality."

"For now," the Penitent said, its voice cold and filled with venom. "Only for now." Both Shiv and Helix looked on at the automaton, unsure how to respond.

Then Helix waved at Shiv. "Try the armor on, see how it works."

Can Hu immediately stomped away, turning to face the other direction. Somehow, despite being a mechanical entity, its body language screamed disgust and outrage.

I'm gonna need to cook it some special soup later to make sure it's not too pissed off, Shiv thought to himself. The Deathless sent out two mana hydras, and using them, he opened the armor. It expanded like it did before, but its insides were layered in mycelial fibers. They glistened with soft amber undertones, and something about the warmth that emanated from within felt very inviting.

Shiv took a step inside, and he slid his arms and legs into place. True to his expectations, the mycelial mesh fit him like a glove, but only a second thereafter, it sank into his skin. It seemed to even meld with him, and suddenly, it didn't feel like Shiv was wearing armor at all. Rather, it was like he had grown an external shell around his body, a carapace, an outer skin. As he closed the armor around himself, he felt his muscles surge with even more strength, as his Physicality was married to the void-mantid musculature. Additionally, his senses went wild.

He felt a slight tickling rub at his forehead, and as he followed that sensation, he realized it was pointing somewhere.

"That feeling you're getting right now is electromagnetism," Helix explained. "Some insects and other creatures have that naturally, but certain Pathbearers can develop it as a skill."

Shiv stared at Helix's face, and through his compound eyes, he saw every detail about the orc's skin. He focused his gaze, and he zoomed in. Soon, he found himself staring into a pocket of dirt half-filling one of the orc's pores. He also tasted a strange flavor emanating from the orc.

"That are pheromone you are currently sniffing."

Shiv realized he was breathing in loudly. Wait, no. That wasn't him. That was the armor. It was sucking in air through the gaps lining its chitinous structure. Shiv grimaced. That's just damn weird. He touched his ribs. He could feel the chitin, feel it like it was part of his body. But it wasn't.

Helix rubbed his chin. "The armor should be entirely synchronized to your movements. Though if it does take damage, you will likely feel the pain as well. But pain doesn't bother you that much, does it?"

"No," Shiv breathed. "Frankly, it only pisses me off by now."

"Good, good. Then I've made the right choice. Now, how about you go say hello to a few other orcs in the armor, and test it out to make sure nothing is wrong with it along the way. Frankly, you should be able to find any orc using this armor's Awareness enchantments, if you know what you're looking for, that is."

"Can I, now?" Shiv muttered. Inside the armor, he licked his lips. "Alright, let's see how good these Awareness enchantments are."

"Uh..." Adam grimaced.

Shiv looked to the Gate Lord. "What?"

"You might want to take it slow."

"Why?" Shiv asked.

"An Awareness Skill is hard to get used to at first." Adam's jaw opened and closed several times. "It's best for you to discover for yourself. I'll help you adapt. There are ways."

And suddenly Shiv's excitement turned to apprehension. Just how bad could improved awareness be?

High-tier Awareness was the worst felling thing in existence. Shiv groaned as his head spun, his ears thundered with noise, and his body trembled as another surge of stimuli flooded his senses. He could feel vibrations coming from all around him, and it was as if a series of war drums were being hammered in the back of his skull.

He could taste pheromones in the air, and orc pheromones tasted like fecal matter laced with dead rats. Shiv knelt on the bridge, gagging, trying not to throw up inside his armor again.

Adam patted his back sympathetically, while Can Hu stood over him, staring down in disappointment as it slowly shook its head. "I warned you, Pathbearer. I warned you that this armor would fail you. I just did not think that it would fail you so utterly, so completely."

"Oh, don't be overdramatic, Penitent," Helix said, pushing the automaton aside slightly. "He'll adapt. It's normal to have such moments when your Awareness reaches new heights."

Shiv groaned. "The magnetic sense is getting worse... It feels like my skull's getting pulled out of my head."

"Oh, don't complain about that. You'll wish you had it, should you ever get lost. Do you know how important it is to know where True North is?"

Shiv didn't even know the concept of True North until recently. Worse was how he could practically see every detail on the orcs, and he saw what orc skin looked like in high definition. He saw the things trapped between their often pristine-seeming teeth, what horrors lurked in the depths of their nostrils, and Shiv wished he were blind. Slowly, he fought his way back to his feet, and as he opened his eyes once more, he winced as the light speared bolts of pain down his nervous system. He quickly adjusted his compound ocular network, returning it to a more baseline human setting.

"Adam," Shiv said. He placed a hand on the Gate Lord's shoulder to support himself. "I owe you an apology."

"Oh?" Adam said. "For what?"

"Is this what it's like for you?"

"Well, mine's Heroic-Tier, and all of my senses are greatly amplified."

Shiv almost sobbed for Adam's suffering. "I'm so sorry. The things you must have heard, the things you must have smelled, all the time. It's... Your life must be hell. I didn't know this was what it was like for you. It must be hell now."

"It's quite alright. Well, I can't quite smell pheromones, but yes, not wonderful. Some things you just pretend you don't see, and some things you can't ignore, no matter how hard you try."

Uva coughed and made a show of looking away, where she accidentally met Valor's gaze. She coughed louder and faced the ground instead.

"Well, now," Helix said, clapping Shiv on the shoulder. "Off the ground. Time for you to improve your Awareness Skill too. There are orcs to see and wars to wage. The sooner you get used to this, the faster you'll develop your Awareness Skill Evolution."

And Shiv laughed. "Everything is just part of your plan to get me to level the supporting skills I need for Biomancy, isn't it?"

Helix adjusted his glasses. "Indubitably."

Chapter 149 (I) Trap

I know it's loud, son. The world is loud. The world... It screams. It sings. It calls to us. And it's bright too. And you haven't even learned what taste can do to you. What you experienced earlier is called a migraine, Adam. You're going to experience it again when the noises and sights become too much. But you'll get better at focusing on what matters and tuning the rest out.

Trust me. You will. Bit by bit. But what is important is that you struggle now. When I can still help you. Where there are people that can still comfort you. Build yourself now among those who care for you, so you can stand alone against a world that doesn't.

Now. Pull your hands away from your eyes and try again. It will hurt. But I will be here. I will always be here for you.

-Roland Arrow to Adam Arrow

"It's like walking around with bombs going off in my eyes and ears. And in my skull." Shiv continued grumbling to himself as he lobbed himself through the air. He was hunting for the orc Psychomancers, the Amnesiac in particular. So far, Helix's claims about the Voidmantid's Awareness-boosting enchantments helping Shiv with his hunt were turning out to be bull and shit. There were felling bunkers and trenches everywhere, and anything that moved pulled at Shiv's eyes like a magnet.

In fact, he was extra sensitive to movements now. With the Ocular Compound Network, he didn't just see further and with more detail, he detected motion abnormally well, to the point he couldn't ignore literal grains of dust passing through the air. Every time an orc moved in his expanded field of view, it was like someone waving their hand directly over his eyes. And with how many orcs there were in the Tutorial, he was constantly being blasted with stimuli.

But his new eye enchantments were only part of the misery. His Antennal Resonance and Pheromonic Cipher wreaked havoc on his sense of taste—and the orcs tasted nightmarish. Different flavors assailed Shiv's olfactory senses. His Antennal Resonance had to do with Chemoreception. That basically had to do with someone's chemical signature. Their scent. No two orcs had the same scent, so the sheer maelstrom of taste Shiv had to gag on was bad enough. Then the Pheromonic Cipher signaled complicated details to Shiv through pheromones, and that was a helping of rotting corpse on top of a shit-crustied pie.

Pair all that with his Magnified Vibrosense, and the slightest tremors in the air sounded like a cluster of mana bombs.

“No idea how I’m going to find the inquisitors like this. I can barely stop myself from throwing up in this helme—alright, Shiv, enough complaining. Let’s figure this shit out.” He shook his head and focused harder on his senses—tried to narrow in on someone that could guide him. His antennae also gave him a sense for True North, but that wasn’t particularly useful for what he needed right now.

He could try dropping into the trenches and asking an orc if they know where any of the surviving inquisitors are, but he suspected they would just screw with him like the orcs aboard the Court Leviathan.

“You want my advice yet?” Adam asked. The Gate Lord lingered just a few meters behind Shiv, flying with his arms crossed and his back to the ground, carried by his pyramid wings as smoothly as if he were lounging on a couch.

“Maybe in a bit,” Shiv said, sniffing. He coughed as he tried to get the taste out of his mouth.

“Don’t bother,” Adam said with a slight sigh. “I used to do that too, but it doesn’t work. The taste never really leaves you. You just learn to get used to it. It never really tastes good, but you stop noticing so much when you find something else to focus on.”

“Yeah. Well. I’m having trouble there too. Focusing. It’s like my attention’s getting pulled apart. There’s too much happening all at once.”

“Try to concentrate on a small part of the world. Or maybe just a single sense. Ignore everything else.”

Shiv took Adam's advice, though it was an uphill battle. His mind jumped from moment to moment, from detail to detail, like it were natural. Uva said his mind was shaped this way for a reason, that he was used to reacting quickly and dealing with many things. That came with drawbacks. But then again, so did these Awareness enchantments.

And Inertial Overdrive, Shiv noted. There were a great many skills that didn't work so great on their own. They needed to be supplemented. Toughness, Magical Resistance, and Disease Resistance were self-sufficient skills, but they were also utterly reactive and mostly passive. Shiv would go so far as to call them foundational, but there were plenty of people who didn't level those skills at all.

Multi-Tasking 19 > 20

Multi-Tasking, meanwhile, seemed to be an essential skill for anyone that wished to delve into high complexity magics. Or sort through all their sensory inputs at once.

Alright. Try not to focus on the vibrations and the tastes. Let's just— And then Shiv's mind stilled as he caught a whiff of something that wasn't quite an orc. No. It tasted a bit like him and Adam. Not quite Uva—though she wasn't that far off. That's a human flavor. Other humans! That's why Helix said it was going to be easier.

And Shiv realized there was another part to the whole tracking people down thing: Deductive reasoning. If he had no plan about what to look for, of course, he wouldn't be able to find the Inquisitors.

Awareness 37 > 38

Shiv followed the chemical signals down to a chain of connected crystalline bunkers five hundred meters away. Behind him, Adam followed, while Uva, Can Hu, and Valor remained aboard the Court Leviathan to continue “talking about important matters” with Helix.

“Did you find them?” Adam asked.

“I think so,” Shiv said. He had the antennae on his shoulders twitch. “I caught a whiff of humans on the wind. I think they’re human, anyway. Smells more like you and me than one of the orcs.”

“Right. Good. You managed to figure that out on your own. You track things based on divergent characteristics. You start broad and narrow down. Habits, pheromones, colors, diet, noises, all these things can help you locate someone easily if they don’t cover their trails well.”

Shiv nodded as he drew closer to the crystalline bunkers. He pulled back on his gravitic field as hard as he could and detonated his sheath briefly before he slammed down into the trenches. Several orcs called out to him with happy greetings, and Shiv offered a grunt of acknowledgement in response. As Adam landed just behind him, the cheers turned to jeers and muttered insults.

The Gate Lord glared at the orcs. “They’re deliberately trying to start something between us. They give you the hero’s welcome and treat me like garbage.”

“Yep,” Shiv said. “Probably want us to fight each other because of that or something. That, and you’re they’re desired prey.”

Adam did a double-take. "You know, I never understood that. Is it the way I talk? The way I act? Do I seem weak to you?"

"No." Shiv squeezed past two orcs as he entered a tunnel leading into a bunker. He was still following the smell, and soon it led him through a series of cramped corridors and then deeper underground thereafter. "Well. Maybe a bit. But the first thing is that they're trying to bother me through you. And another thing is that you're a Hero. You're dangerous in a fight, which makes the possibility of facing you exciting. But also, you're very human."

"Very human?" Adam asked, not understanding. "And you're not? Well, besides your monster mind and not-dying thing. Is that it?"

Shiv tried to figure out what his own instincts were telling him. "Not dying is one thing. But it's the fact that I can just put up with their brutality. Not you. Right. So, not really human, but humane. You care a lot more than I do. And because they can make you care and bother you, they like attacking you. They're all assholes, Adam. They're assholes looking for a sadistic hit, and the more uncomfortable they can make someone powerful feel, the greater the dominance. Something like that."

"Gods, these creatures are wretched," Adam muttered.

"And don't you ever forget it, Gate Lord," an orc called out as he sneered at Adam.

Then, he spat at the Gate Lord. And Shiv caught sight of something moving within the orc's phlegm. It looked like a needle. The Deathless halted time and focused his compound vision on the orc's spit. It didn't just look like a needle; it was a needle. He stretched his Biomancy field over the tip, and a few spell patterns came aglow. He wasn't sure what it was exactly, but he remembered seeing another spell chain like that somewhere.

It took a moment for it to come back to him. The basilisk venom, Shiv remembered.

Memorization 13 > 14

Shiv plucked the needle out of the time-frozen phlegm and glared at the orc. The large bastard had green veins running along his neck. He also had a glass eye with a crosshair inside. Shiv assimilated the toxins lining the needle and considered using his mana hydra to inject it into the offending orc assassin, but decided against doing that.

Instead, the Deathless drove both thumbs into the orc's eyes and squeezed hard. The orc's natural eye turned to paste. His glass eye shattered. Shiv's gravitic field collapsed inward around the orc's skull. After a brief struggle, the orc's head turned into a compressed sphere of gore.

There. That should be a good enough warning.

He let time resume. The orc's skull exploded in a fountain of giblets. Adam had already been in motion of dodging to the side—having noticed the needle too—but he flinched as he caught sight of the dead orc. The other gray brutes around Shiv let out loud laughs but kept their distance. More fear chains extended from their bodies and flowed into him thereafter.

“What—” Adam hopped over the dead orc as Shiv continued down the hall, following the smell. “What in the Ascendants’ mercy was that? He spat something at me.”

“A poisoned needle,” Shiv growled. “Don’t worry. Got rid of it. And then I got rid of him. And this is why I was godsdamned worried about bringing you and the others here. It’s just a matter of time before one of these cunning but low-impulse motherfuckers tries something. Probably not going to be the last orc I kill.”

Adam looked around at the other orcs. They just stared back, but didn’t act.

“They’re not going to attack us,” Shiv said. “That’s my gut feeling. This idiot just played his hand hard. And badly. Next time, I’ll felling mutilate his soul and leave him a nugget of screaming meat like Band.”

“Why didn’t you do it this time?” Adam asked.

“Because I’m trying not to lose track of the inquisitors.”

“They’re a few rooms ahead. We’re heading into an underground prison complex. Or more like a torture ring, judging from all the implements the orcs have set up.” Shiv turned to stare at Adam. “What? Of course I know where we’re going, Shiv. I’ve known since we entered the gate. I’m always checking my surroundings. I just wanted to see how far you could get on your own. More struggle means higher levels—best to only offer the minimal level of help required.”

Sometimes, Shiv needed to be reminded of just how useful having a Heroic-Tier Awareness Skill was.

True to Adam’s word, Shiv soon found himself in what could best be described as a bizarre torture site. A large chamber lined with countless cells and strange implements greeted him. Another peculiarity was how the walls here were made entirely from focus crystal. Shiv looked around, noticing a few orcs

grinning down at him from the walkways above. They all had various Magical Skills. Adept-Tier at the least.

"I changed my mind," Adam said, glowering at the orcs. "This isn't a prison or a torture site. It's a human experimentation facility."

"Might not be just for humans," Shiv said. "A lot of these racks I'm seeing are orc-sized."

The Gate Lord shuddered. The orcs staring at them laughed.

They found the Amnesiac and a cadre of ten other Psychomancers gathered in a larger cell within the chamber. Inside, Shiv bit back a groan as he tasted the scent of infected flesh and loose bowels. As he entered the room, he found the orcs flooding their Psychomancy mana into their prisoners. There were around eight Inquisitors left, and all of them had been stripped bare. Their clothes were nowhere to be seen, but Shiv concentrated on the smell of blood and found another set of scents nearby.

"What are you monsters doing to these poor bastards now?" Adam sighed. He tried to hide his disgust and deliberately kept his gaze away from the inquisitors. Most of the orcs turned and smiled sweetly at him. One continued focusing on the prisoners, and that one, Shiv guessed, was the Amnesiac.

The Amnesiac was quite short for an orc, but still probably weighed about three times as much as Adam. He wore a vibrantly-colored, feathered duster that depicted an eye on his back, and he had a small black circle painted at the center of his forehead. "Ah. Insul. Finally. You have deigned to meet me. I am honored. Please, behold our labors."

The orc's voice was rather high, and he gestured at the Inquisitors. Their expressions were blank, their mouths were slack, and drool ran down their chins.

"We had them cleaned and properly mended by our Biomancers," the Amnesiac said. "So that they will be ready for whatever operations we decide to commit them too. A few were disqualified due to innate mental instabilities or lingering magics we could not overcome in the short time we have. We hope you understand."

Shiv nodded, but he still gave Adam a look. "I think Uva should be here for this too."

"Ah. Yes. The Seeker..." the Amnesiac breathed, as if he had been anticipating this moment. "Please. Invite her."

The Deathless froze. He turned a wary gaze on the orc. "What did you just call her?"

"The Seeker," the Amnesiac repeated. "It is a field of expertise I share with her." The orc tapped his forehead, and the black dot brightened with colors beyond Shiv's ability to describe.

Adam groaned. "Oh, gods. We chose the orcs specifically to avoid dealing with the felling Outsiders."

"The Shapeless Ones are never close. But they are also always close." The orc giggled. "But worry not. I am not a Seeker myself. I am just a Listener. I hear, and I tell the Challenger things. I tell my fellows things. And I hunt that which shouldn't be hunted." The Amnesiac licked his lips. "Dreams taste delightful."

Just then, Adam fired an arrow through the flesh of existence, and as a dimensional pathway expanded, Uva appeared on the other side. Behind her, Valor had his right hand placed atop Helix's head. The orc's beady eyes gleamed with something close to fear as Valor talked about "Skill Plagues" and "Curses that affect even Reincarnators". Can Hu stood beside the orc, glaring up menacingly.

"Adam? Shiv? Something requires my attention?" Uva stepped aboard her shield and began drifting across. As soon as her mana strings spilled through the rift, they cracked against the orcs' Psychomancy fields.

"Potent," an orc chittered.

"Delicate," another mused.

One tilted his head. "Hmm. Strings? Haven't seen this skill before."

"Puppeteer," the Amnesiac declared without hesitation. He fully turned away from the prisoners and stood at the ready, preparing to greet Uva. As she emerged and stepped onto the ground, she regarded each of the orc Psychomancers only briefly, and then turned her magic on the prisoners. She slipped her strands into their minds and rooted about for a moment. The orcs did nothing to stop her. Instead, they all sported eager grins, as if diligent students awaiting praise.

After a minute, Uva retracted her mana from their minds and regarded the Amnesiac for a beat. "The rewritten memories are sound, but the damage you inflicted on their egos is extreme. They are barely self-aware."

“Deliberately done,” the Amnesiac said with a bow. “We focused on letting them retain their combat capabilities in case the Insul wishes to waste their lives attacking the Necrotechs.”

“Waste?” Shiv said.

“Yes. I believe they are best returned to their comrades. To serve as internal saboteurs and the like.” The Amnesiac hummed with joy, still facing Uva. “Before you continue with your criticisms, understand that we are not entirely done with our adjustments, and that this is not their final configuration. But I also wanted to have something presentable. For you.”

“For me,” Uva said dully. Shiv was watching the orc intently now. He fought the urge to just hack the Amnesiac’s head off. The orc was playing at something with Uva, and Shiv didn’t like it. Especially because he didn’t know what he was playing at.

“Yes,” the orc Psychomancer breathed. “Your skill... It is favored by spies. It is the Psychomancy of a spider pluck-pluck-plucking on her strings.” He mimicked the motion of pulling at a stringed instrument, grinning.

“And yours is that of a Thief,” Uva replied. “You grow stronger by swallowing others’ memories. Collector of the Forgotten Pasts, is it?”

The orc nodded joyously. “Indeed. Indeed. Quite well studied. Mine is very esoteric Skill Evolution. As is yours.”

Uva regarded the inquisitors once more. “You understand that I will never enter their minds, yes?”

The Amnesiac's expression flinched imperceptibly. "But why? I am—"

"I studied what you have done. I know you've hidden memories inside other memories. That means you're very skilled with Psychology and Psychomancy. More skilled than I. So. I will not risk myself. I am not entering this trap. Let that thought die."

The smiles on the orc Psychomancers' faces turned to frowns. Several of them turned to glare at the Amnesiac. "Was that what you were doing while the rest of us were doing the actual work?"

"You will have to be more subtle to see my skill," Uva replied. "And I will give you nothing if you provoke me. I care nothing for pride. I see your capabilities and have no interest in playing this dominance game. Pursue it if you must, but I will simply avoid you."

"I won't," Shiv said, his voice rumbling with an undercurrent of violence. "I'm not exactly sure what you guys are doing, but I'm getting the urge to mutilate an orc's soul again." And then he squinted at the eye motif on the orc's back. "Amnesiac. You have dealings with the Outsiders, yeah?"

Uva's head turned to Shiv, then back to the orc. "Does he, now?"

"I do," the Amnesiac said. "I—"

"What did the Stranger offer you for her life? It is a Quest?" Shiv's guess was as wild as it was blunt. Adam did a double-take. Uva stopped breathing.

The Amnesiac blinked. Shiv noted how the orc's facial muscles were rolling under his skin. "How—"

The Deathless manifested his temporal shell. A faint Chronomancy ward rippled out from the Amnesiac. Shiv shoved it aside with his Magebreaker. He coated his Skysplitter in Vitae and started carving into the orc. He tore and mutilated him in body and soul, snarling like a rabid dog. When he was done, when the Amnesiac was in tatters inside and out, he leaned close beside the orc's right ear. "Hey, Stranger. If you're watching this, find better servants. Maybe one that doesn't wear a big godsdamned eye on his coat."

Then, he caved the Amnesiac's skull in, just as his temporal shell shattered.

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The Amnesiac erupted into a burst of bloodied mist. Shiv wrapped himself and his companions with his Aegis of Assimilation, but the other orc Psychomancers and Inquisitors were coated in a deep, dark red.

“Gods—fuck!” Adam shouted. He shot Shiv a terrified stare. “Again?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said, glaring down at the jigsaw puzzle of flesh that remained of the Amnesiac. He held his Vitae-coated blade up to the other orcs, and tried to keep his rage in check—he did so by spending all his anger on his Shape of Monstrosity instead. “Hey. Eyes on me.”

The other Psychomancers obeyed. Fear flowed from them into Shiv. Fear he drank in and relished. Fear he earned with the murder of their compromised Maestro.

Shape of Monstrosity 106 > 107

“You guys are done with the prisoners. I don’t want you touching them anymore. What I want you all to do is prepare yourselves for the surface or the Abyss. Your Maestro here’s got connections to an Outsider god we’re not on great terms with. Or whatever the hell the Stranger is. I don’t know if the Challenger cares, but if I catch any hint of Outsider that isn’t the Dreamtaker, I’m killing the orc in question and mutilating their soul. You understand me.”

The orc Psychomancers turned their eyes down again. Chunks of the Amnesiac drifted along a spreading current of blood. Giblets of flesh covered the kneeling Inquisitors and the orcs.

“Dominance,” one of them breathed. “No hesitation. How sublime.”

“Glorious aggression,” another orc said, laughing. “We hear you, Insul. We heed you. But the prisoners—”

“We’ll handle them ourselves.” Shiv gritted his teeth. “I should have handled them myself in the first place. Godsdammit, I can’t believe I let you bastards bribe me—I’m a godsdamned moron. The next orc that tries to mess with my head and gets caught doing so is going to permanently get their arms and legs cut off, and then I’m going to wear them like a felling pain vest that I can constantly dump my wounds into during a fight.”

The Deathless let out a frustrated breath—and felt even more fear rush into his body. Additional chains hardened against him, and he followed them back through the open dimensional pathway. There, on the bridge of the Court Leviathan, the orc Biomancers looked on in rapt fascination. Valor raised Helix’s head toward Shiv, and the orc swallowed worriedly as he met his gaze.

“Ah, Insul,” Helix coughed. “You understand that it would be... exceptionally harder for me to direct your Biomancy studies if I were a quote felling pain vest unquote.”

Shiv stared at the orc Biomancer. “That’s part of why you’re not a pain vest yet, Helix. Or dead.”

Helix swallowed. “What’s the other reason?”

“That you actually bribed me instead of doing what Amnesiac just tried. But, Helix.”

“Yes?”

“You threaten to give any of my companions a strange and rare disease, and I’ll match that by giving you strange and rare wounds. I won’t ever kill you, though. No. I actually kind of like you. And that might not be a good thing for you.”

And then the Deathless said no more. Instead, he chose to wordlessly glare at all the orcs on the bridge as the rift slowly closed. When they were gone, Shiv saw that the orc Psychomancers were already gone, while Adam and Uva regarded him quietly.

The former looked concerned. The latter had a faint hint of lust in her gaze.

“Shiv,” Adam said warily. “Are you alright?”

“I just had to kill two of these orcs because they did exactly what I was worried about. I’m pissed and paranoid. Which makes me more pissed.”

“And aggressive,” Uva whispered.

Shiv sighed and rubbed his face. “I should’ve taken the Inquisitors from the orcs. Should’ve done a lot of things. And now we have to worry about orcs being on some other god’s payroll.” He glared up at the ceiling. “You run a loose felling ship, you know that, Challenger?”

The orc god didn’t say anything, but Shiv got the feeling the Challenger saw this all as entertainment.

I just have to be suspicious of all the orcs all the time, Shiv decided. Was it going to be exhausting? Yes. But it was probably going to level his Multi-Tasking fast too. If I wanted to take it easy, I would've just stayed in the kitchen all the time. Nothing for it. No complaining. Let's deal with the problems.

"Uva. The Inquisitors. What's wrong with them, exactly? What was the Amnesiac trying to do?"

"He basically hollowed them of self-determination. In theory, it should make them easy to manipulate and direct."

"But he did something to their minds?"

"Yes. Hidden memories inside memories. Very subtly done. But my control of Psychomancy allows me to feel exactly how dense certain memories are. My suspicions were aroused because of that. It seems like an effective trap for another Psychomancer—especially with how he offered it specifically for my benefit. But how did you know he was serving the Stranger?"

"It was a blind guess," Shiv said. "But him choosing to wear a coat with a giant eye on it didn't help him. Guess he might not be fully aware of what went down between us and the Recollector, maybe. Doesn't matter. He's going to be reincarnating in pieces from now on. I kept enough of his brain matter intact, so I think he'll get to live for a while every time he comes back."

Adam shuddered. "Gods, Shiv."

"No. To hells with him. And fuck the orc that went for you too. I should've shredded that one as well."

“What?” Uva asked. “An orc made an attempt on Adam’s life?”

“Yeah. Cost him a head and a life. We’re going to have to look out for each other a lot more here. Even more than before. The longer we stay here, the more some of them are just going to try something. Different orcs have different impulse controls, but they’re all going to try and hurt us eventually.” Shiv frowned. “It’s just hard to keep that in your head when they start charming you.”

“And the bastards can be charming,” Adam said.

“Yeah.” Shiv sighed. “Especially for me.”

Uva tilted her head and squinted. “I might have an idea on how to improve your Social Skills. At least, your resistance to being influenced or charmed by the orcs. But I’ll need to vet him first. Make sure he won’t compromise you himself.”

“Him?” Shiv asked. Adam looked at Uva curiously as well.

“Angelo,” Uva said. “He has a Master-Tier Charm Skill. And ten other Master-Tier Social Skills.”

“Ten?” Shiv gasped. “Broken Moon, I didn’t know he was that powerful.”

“His mental state has left him diminished. But even so, letting your gaze linger on his face for a few seconds is usually enough for you to be compromised to a substantial degree. I suspect he served the role of seducer for the Ophereus Bloodline. And if you learn to resist him, it might make things easier against the orcs as well.”

“You’re willing to let Shiv be seduced by a vampire over and over?” Adam asked incredulously.

“I’m obviously going to stop it before anything occurs,” Uva muttered in annoyance. “But yes: Comparatively, Angelo is far less dangerous than the orcs. Now. Another question is what we are to do with these inquisitors.”

Shiv frowned at the eight blood-coated humans. They all just stared ahead through everything. Uva wasn’t lying; the orcs did a number on them mentally. “Was the Amnesiac really better than you, or were you just saying that to throw him off?”

“When it comes to Psycho-Surgery? Yes,” Uva admitted it without any difficulty. “I suspect things wouldn’t have gone my way in a direct clash either. But his mana field was compact and more than a little unwieldy. Such was why I could feel how much he hid within a single memory, while he remained blissfully ignorant about his own mistake.”

“Great. So. They’re wasted.” Adam bit his lip as he stared at the Inquisitors. “It might be more merciful to finish them off. Bloody hells, can we even trust the orcs to do anything?”

“Sure,” Shiv said. “Fight. It’s not like the Amnesiac wasn’t planning to use the inquisitors against our enemies. I think I agree with the dead piece of shit: It might be a waste to just throw them at the Necrotechs. Sullain’s already antagonistic toward the inquisition. What we need is for them to show up and start a fight.”

“And how are we going to do that?” Adam asked. “Their minds are traps, and they’re basically vegetables unless Uva fixes them, or we find a reliable group of orc Psychomancers. And good luck with that.”

“Or...” Shiv said, grinning to himself. “Maybe we keep them like this. Most of them.”

“What are you planning, Shiv? What’s happening in that terrible, violent head of yours?” Adam asked, dreading.

Shiv smirked, then he reached into his cape and pulled out his Mask of False Paths with a flourish.

Adam and Uva both groaned.

“Shiv. Dear,” Uva muttered in discomfort, as if a mother trying to tell her child she wasn’t going to be buying them a present.

“Have you forgotten that you are the worst spy in all Integration—and likely beyond?” Adam hissed.

“Sure. But if there's one role I can play, it's a brain-damaged torture victim who escaped from the Necrotechs. We can pin all this on Sullain. We just get a bunch of orcs to alter the inquisitors’ near-term memories while Uva watches or something. Then, I go to the surface with the other inquisitors, and we get rescued by Stormhalt. I’ll get taken into camp, I’ll tell them that Sullain has the Animancy Core and is about to use it. They’ll rush in and start a fight. We’ll have the orc forces join in and get an opening to evacuate Blackedge as well, while the orcs and Titansbane and whoever else gang up on Sullain.”

Adam still looked uneasy. "But... if things go wrong even slightly..."

"I can leave a time anchor in the gate. I'll just cast myself back if things go to hell. Besides, you guys can come along with me. We can bring a few orcs over as well if we need expendable support. My cape has a dimension inside it."

Uva considered Shiv's plan with a hum, but Adam still looked uneasy. "What if I take the mask in your stead?" he asked.

"No," Shiv said. "I'm not risking that."

"And you don't have the emotional control for tradecraft either," Uva added.

"And Shiv does?" Adam hissed.

"I am surprised to say this myself, but he is actually less likely to murder Stormhalt on a whim."

"I—I just want to talk to him. I need to understand—"

“This is a sentence often said preceding a violent murder, Hero Adam,” Uva noted. “No. And you are the Gate Lord. You are needed for the continual development of Gate Piety—and for someone to go over critical, strategic decisions. Such as planning the liberation of your town.”

Adam grunted uncomfortably, but nodded. “I still think this is going to turn to shit.”

“It will,” Uva said. “But things ‘going to shit’ is a Shiv specialty. He thrives in nightmarish situations. And I mean that in a complimentary way, Dear Brute.”

“I know...” Shiv smirked slightly. “And maybe a bit of chaos is what we need right now.”

“Right,” Adam said. “So. We figure out how best to return these inquisitors to the Stormhalt and provoke him and his army into attacking Sullain. We mass the orcs on the surface in anticipation of the two sides clashing, then move to fully liberate and evacuate Blackedge when the battle commences.”

“We should also let some orcs out into the Abyss in the meantime,” Shiv said. “Have them harass the vampires so we don’t end up getting attacked by another army out of nowhere.”

“Right. Well. Fine. We have something of a general direction.” Adam huffed. “Gods, I can’t believe I’m about to let you play at being a spy again.”

Shiv’s face twitched. Then, an evil grin spread across his features. “I mean, what’s the worst that could happen?”

“Godsdammit, Shiv, why the hells did you have to say that?”

“More deaths. More levels.”

The Gate Lord groaned.

Chapter 150 (I) Provoke [I]

Misinformation, saboteurs, deceivers, illusionists, Psychomancers, shapeshifters, even expendable clones. You will run into these on the field. Your enemies will use these tactics, these means against you, to confuse you, to feed you false intelligence, and guide you down the path to destruction, destruction engineered by lies and misunderstanding.

I have seen powerful armies collapse in on themselves, shattered by a well-crafted lie. I have seen formations turn on each other as paranoia and suspicion become too much to bear. I have seen good men, good women, good bots march to their doom because their investigators failed them, because their commanders weren't clever enough, weren't perceptive enough to notice the cage of falsehood being constructed around them.

Seek the truth, always seek the truth, for what you don't know is fatal. What you don't know will kill you. What you don't know will be used against you, and when the enemy is at your gate, when they are battering down your doors and slitting your throats while you still lie in bed, "I don't know" is not a good enough apology for the Pathbearer beside you.

You must know, you must, for if you allow ignorance to prevail, then you cede your life to your enemy, and they have every intention of killing you.

-Professor Hernando Utez, INTEL-101, Phoenix Academy

Shiv and the others ended up killing forty-three orcs after the Amnesiac. The bulk of grayskin deaths happened at Shiv's brutal hands. Most of them perished while trying to hurt Adam in some fashion or another. True to Shiv's words, they were drawn to him like ravenous wolves to a bleeding foal.

They struck at Adam using a variety of measures. Some took quick shots from range, while others tried to poison him. A few planted bombs—that Adam spotted almost immediately. Several pianos of various compositions fell randomly out of the sky, but Shiv swatted them aside. The closest Adam came to dying was when one orc Chronomancer tried his luck. Shiv halted the javelin he threw at the last second, and then relocated it down the orc's throat.

Things got quiet for a while after that.

A few orcs tried to target Uva, and apparently also Valor and Can Hu as well, but those attempts went as poorly as the others. Between Adam's ever-watchful gaze, Shiv's willingness to perform acts of ultraviolence, Uva's surveillance, Valor's experience and attentiveness, and several surveillance drones deployed by Can Hu, the group looked out for themselves and each other. This was further aided by certain orcs betraying their fellows, reminding Shiv once again that they were highly individualistic monsters.

Ultimately, the attempted assassinations were just something that needed to be dealt with. There was no avoiding them. In fact, with Shiv and his companions performing so well, more orcs would be tempted to take a swing to see if they could succeed where their kindred had failed.

In the meantime, however, the army parked right outside the Tutorial Gateway treated everything as perfectly normal. Orc Psychomancers arrived, trying to offer their service. Mortar came seeking Shiv, showing him a series of maps drawn of Lost Angeles, maps that improved on the information gleaned by Adam during his and Shiv's scouting run a few days ago. Orcs with the Path of the Shadow were already slipping into the ruined megacity.

They infiltrated Necrotech observation posts and were working their way through the periphery. However, reports indicated that Vicar Sullain was concentrating his forces around the Abyss, gathering them near Blackedge. Mortar suspected that the Necrotechs were massing for a concentrated push, but something about their movements left him uncertain.

Stealth-focused orcs also reported something else that was strange. The Retribution Crusade's frequency of attack had dropped substantially. They still launched artillery and spells at Blackedge, but it was mostly just to strain the defenders and to see if the wards were still working. Roland, meanwhile, continued showering the world with his endless reign of arrows. Even so, the orcs noted it was thinning. The Town Lord was either finally growing weary or conserving his own strength to face the coming assault.

"How long do you think it will take for Sullain to make his move?" Adam asked Mortar as they discussed battle strategies aboard Courtney. The heavyset orc clad in automaton parts rubbed at his mechanical lower jaw.

"Hard to say exactly. There's been a lot of Necrotechs scurrying about. Their death-wearing rats are digging tunnels all around the city. And there's a lot of movement in the Abyss. They could probably make a real mess of things right now if they just throw themselves at Blackedge. But the strange thing is, I haven't seen anything of Sullain. Neither has any other orc, for that matter. The Vicar is just missing. Has been missing for a good while, it seems. We managed to take some Deathstalkers alive, and they said that Sullain has been missing since a few nights ago, when the big bomb went off. He left to work on a 'new weapon', and his last orders were to keep Blackedge pressured and the Town Lord exhausted."

"New weapon," Adam echoed. He looked at Shiv, and the Deathless felt his stomach turn into a lead balloon.

"This is a good sign," Valor said, though he sounded like he was trying to keep everyone optimistic. "It will take time for him to discover what the Vitae can do. Sullain is a consummate scholar, and as such, he will not use a tool without fully understanding it, unless he is absolutely desperate."

"The fact that he knows or suspects how to make it into a weapon means we need to accelerate," Adam replied.

"Indeed," Valor said. "More than accelerate, you should seize the initiative. He does not expect to be attacked right now. He does not know of the orcs, or at least not of the whole orc army, waiting nearby. I suspect that the Necrotechs will not do anything major until Sullain returns. He is conserving his forces until he can bend Shiv's Vitae to achieve his desired end, or mount a combined push to finish things, if his new weapon cannot. But we will not give them that time. He will reveal himself if his forces are on the verge of being overrun."

"Perhaps now would be a good time to see if we can make contact with Blackedge as well," Uva suggested.

Adam stared down at the map Mortar had made. He narrowed his eyes at the many figurines representing Necrotech strongholds. His gaze swept across the tunnels forged by Sullain's forces as well. The parts the orcs mapped out portrayed the underside of the megacity to be almost akin to a termite's nest. Tunnels connected to the chasm were still being constructed, and so more Necrotechs could appear anywhere in the city, meaning the battle lines weren't going to be on the ground level, but subterranean.

"Mortar," Shiv asked, "how good are your Geomancers?"

"Our Geomancers?" Mortar chuckled. "Impressive, I would say, but far fewer than what Sullain possesses. I'd bet on one of our best against any of theirs if it was a head-on fight. But when it comes to construction, creating, building, expanding? No, I don't believe we can do what you want us to do. We can't collapse all the tunnels easily. It will not be a worthwhile effort, either."

"Why?" Adam asked. "It could choke the pathways into the city."

"Because it will take substantially fewer Geomancers on their part to hold us at bay, and in the meantime, they can let their Adepts continue expanding their tunnels. We have numbers, they have numbers, but they are already established. We will likely take immense casualties trying to push on them this way, and we will also betray our presence. And that's the worst of it. We give up all our surprise if we start fighting over the underground with these death-rats." Mortar considered for a moment, his jaw moving. "It does sound like fun. I'm not against following through anyway if you're determined to make this as bloody as possible. But it's not exactly practical."

Adam's eyes turned away from the tunnels and fell upon Blackedge. "What about the sky, then?" Adam asked.

"The direct airspace above Blackedge is contested. Your father's arrows are something the Vicar's forces do everything they can to avoid. Even so, certain dimensional ships will still drop wings of dragons to bombard the town. And outside of a twenty-kilometer radius, everything is utterly controlled by the Necrotechs." Then, Mortar smiled. "However, his control isn't what I'd call ironclad."

The orc made a fist. "He's mainly relying on dimensional ships. That tells me his aerial units are lacking. He's created a sort of teleportation network, allowing them to dump forces from one area to another. They're also supplementing their Riders with lesser dimensional escorts."

"So, do you think we can take the sky from them?" Adam asked.

Mortar threw his head back and chuckled jovially. "I think we can take the sky from them. And the ground. But the underground... I suspect that's where the fight will be. And the Vicar's existence will make the rest dubious as well. Legends turn tides, Gate Lord, and there's none on our side. Sullain himself will cost a good chunk of our combined Masters and Heroes to bring down. The gulf between Legend and Hero is wider than that between Master and Initiate."

"But Legends can still be killed," Shiv said. He gave Valor a look thereafter. "Or at least broken."

"Killed is more common," Valor responded.

"Alright then." Adam licked his lips. "I think we have an angle. We focus on taking the sky away from Sullain first. And through that, we establish an opening to Blackedge. I will try to make contact as soon as possible. That will allow me to better assess the situation of the town, see what they need in terms of resources and support."

Shiv noted a predatory gleam in Mortar's gaze. He leaned closer to Adam and projected a telepathic thought. "Yeah, I don't know if we want any of the orcs getting into Blackedge."

"I don't much want it either," Adam said, his stare never leaving Mortar's face. "But I don't think we have much of a choice. Can you behave yourself, Mortar?"

"C—can I behave myself?" Mortar replied, stuttering with mock indignation, and placing a palm on his chest. "When have I ever misbehaved? Have I given you any reason to doubt me?"

"I think you're patient, Mortar," Shiv said, "and that scares me."

"I scare you?" Mortar's mouth widened into a fanged smile as he placed another large hand on his chest. "I'm flattered."

"Don't be," Shiv replied. "Mortar, I know what's coming. Okay, well, maybe I don't know exactly what's coming, but you're going to do something messed up. You're going to try to hurt us in some way down the line. You're patient; that just means your itch is building up more and more. So I got a bit of advice for you. Scratch it using the Necrotechs, and keep being patient when it comes to me. You don't want to end up like Band or the Amnesiac."

"No," Mortar said quite calmly. "No, I do not. And more importantly, I'm not interested in dying at your hands. I just want to be favored." The large orc's expression turned vicious. "Because I got a nemesis of my own to kill."

Shiv met up with several other orcs after that, going over a few other issues pertaining to how many forces wished to go to the surface, and how many wished to depart through the Abyss gateway. Thus far, the separation was more of a 70-30%. Most of the orcs came to face a Legend: to potentially bring down Vicar Sullain. More than that, they wanted to be fighting beside the Insul when the time came, to have a chance at tasting the System's favor, and potentially inheriting it for themselves.

The orcs that wished to go after the Bloodspawn were personally interested in the destruction of the First Blood. Some of the orcs simply liked hurting vampires, describing them as resilient prey who could be used to scratch the itch over and over. Others, like Helix, were offended by the vampires' existence for one reason or another. A lot of that went back to decadence. Orcs despised vampires for fleeing from strife, for turning away from a fight. It was as if cowardice and a refusal to struggle were the closest things the orcs had to societal pet peeves.

With that stated, the orcs began to mass themselves, preparing to depart. Shiv noted that the orcs had also built some kind of mechanical contraption in the trench line. It seemed to be a series of modular platforms that fit on a rail, platforms that the orcs could race across, allowing them to get from one place to another quickly. It was mainly meant for the orc Initiates, as those at Adept-Tier or above could move relatively fast on their own. This was just a feat of engineering convenience to make sure even the weakest orcs would be ready for bloodshed in an instant.

And soon, they would get to enjoy as much bloodshed as they wanted.

Adam briefly departed to rush the construction of dimensional pathways within each of the gateway checkpoints. This would allow the orcs to pass through one of the two gateways at will without ever slipping into Gate Piety proper.

Finally, Shiv met BBQ and ended up beating the orc to death in a fit of frustration when he saw the filth caking the orc's spatula. A spatula the orc intended to use as a cooking utensil for the cooking challenge. The fact that a mess of questionably sourced elf meat buns lay upon a massive skillet didn't help things, either. Connected to each of the meat buns were umbilical cords and a letter for Shiv.

"I'm still alive, and you'll be seeing me around <3"

Shiv crumpled the note as he splattered the nightmarish meat prepared for him. "Male Pregnancy. When I find you, I'm going to starve the living shit out of you. I'm going to make you a godsdamned vegetarian orc for all this."

After murdering BBQ's cooking assistants as well, Shiv began his own preparations for his upcoming infiltration mission. He chose one among the surviving inquisitors to serve as his perfect semblance, and he euthanized them painlessly. Shiv suspected that they wouldn't feel anything or even respond if he tried to torture them to death, considering how broken they were on the inside.

But torture wasn't Shiv's thing. It would never truly be his thing, no matter how much the orcs pushed for it. Some new orc Psychomancers were brought in to adjust the memories of the other surviving inquisitors. The main details of the ambush remained unchanged, but rather than orcs, they remembered facing Necrotechs.

Uva monitored them as they made these changes, and after performing a final sweep of her own, she gave a confirmation that the inquisitors were prepared for use. With that done, all Shiv really needed to do was make contact with Stormhalt's army alongside the other inquisitors. And that was going to need some careful setup as well.

"It would likely be best if you were discovered in the wilderness or fleeing from enemy captivity. As such, you and the other inquisitors should be dressed in ragged, scavenged apparel. This will spare you the need for a weapon as well." Adam pointed at a stretch of coast near Margarita Point. It was approximately 100 kilometers away from the outskirts of Lost Angeles, but the Gate Lord was certain this was the route Stormhalt's army would take. "Here is a believable point of interception. If you manage to make it all the way back to Fortress-City Diego, it won't make sense."

"Why?" Shiv asked.

"Because you would have gone to Margarita Point for shelter instead."

"Doesn't the Inquisition want to keep this quiet?" Shiv asked. "Maybe that's why we avoided Margarita Point."

Adam shook his head. "The Inquisition can make sure the Pathbearers at Margarita Point don't utter a single word. No, it would make no sense for you to flee all the way back to Fortress-City Diego. Furthermore, if you are capable of navigating all that way back, it would undercut the image you are trying to sell. The image of a broken and traumatized Pathbearer who suffered brutal treatment at the hands of the Necrotechs when the expeditionary force was ambushed."

"Right, got it. Make it seem desperate. Like we barely escaped."

"Correct." And Adam grimaced slightly. "That's why I think we should add some injuries to the other inquisitors." Shiv understood why the Gate Lord was uncomfortable. "I'll see it done myself. If we're gonna spend their lives anyway, I'm gonna make sure it's done right. An orc might get carried away."

"When you intercept Stormhalt's army, remember to focus on the Animancy Core when they question you. Stress that above everything else. It should provoke them to pick up their pace. Smaller contingents of Pathbearers can move fast if they want to, and if Stormhalt is desperate, I can see him dispatching his scouts and aerial cavalry escort ahead to skirmish and prepare battlefield conditions. That should be able to draw the Necrotechs' attention as well. After they take you in, we move on to phase two of the operation."

And then he turned the briefing over to Uva.

"Phase two is intelligence gathering and opportunistic sabotage, but only if possible," the Umbral explained. "Thus far, we know that Stormhalt's army is 100,000 strong, minus the 2,000 Pathbearers that composed the expeditionary force. The rest of Stormhalt's army are composed of high-quality mercenaries and trusted members of the Inquisition. They are, as with most armies, mostly made up of Adepts, but a substantial number are masters. According to Sijik, at least one in ten Pathbearers in Stormhalt's army has a Master-Tier magical skill, so we will be facing a magi-heavy army."

A few mutters were exchanged at that, but Uva had more to say. "Furthermore, they have an elite Psychomancer core group, made up of 5,000 Psychomancers and led by a group of 10 Heroic-Tier Psychomancers. They are further supported by another 10 Heroic Investigators, but those are mostly non-martial Pathbearers. The total number of Heroes in Stormhalt's army is estimated to be about eighty, but they do have one Legend.'

Adam held up a hand. "And if that Legend is truly Jessica Hawgrave, do not, and I repeat, do not, under any circumstances, provoke her if you don't have to, Shiv. Do not provoke her."

"Don't," Uva said, pointing her finger in Shiv's face as well.

The Deathless looked between the two of them, and he sighed. "Yeah. I know. I'm not that reckless." Adam and Uva shared a look. They both snorted.

Adam laughed. "Shiv, come on,"

"You're going to run into her eventually," Uva said. "And your mind will come up with the following thoughts..." She paused as she tried to adopt Shiv's voice. "'Wow, she hits really hard. That's a pretty powerful skill. I wonder if I can survive that. If not, I hope it kills me good. I need more Toughness levels.'"

Halfway through, Adam started cackling, and Uva finished her performance with a slight smirk.

Shiv glared at them. "I'm more complicated than that."

"But the point still stands," Adam said. "If you are found out, or if you are compromised, or if you get the slightest feeling that something might be wrong, you cast yourself back to your temporal anchor inside the gate."

"Absolutely," Shiv said with a confirming nod. "But I don't think I'll be doing that immediately."

"Such is the hope," Uva muttered. "If the second phase works well, when night falls and an opportunity presents itself, I will reach out using my mana strands and see what I can learn. Furthermore, Whisper and a team of five other Heroic-Tier orc Assassins and Shadows wish to accompany us on this operation. We can dispatch them from the Garden of Bountiful Alloy should there be an opening, and they can further support our efforts in sabotaging the Inquisitorial Army."

"And then we get to phase three," Shiv said, effectively bringing the briefing to an end. "If everything hasn't gone to hell, I march with them and push them to engage the Necrotechs. If things do go to hell, well, I'll reveal my true form, pretend to be a Necrotech, do a bunch of damage, proclaim the glory of Vicar Sullain and the Great One, and take a swing at Stormhalt. Then, I cast myself back to my anchor after everyone gets back in my cape and extract that way. Should still be enough to have them bite the bait regardless."

"It should," Adam said, though he sounded like he still had some doubts. He bit his lip and looked at Shiv. "Listen, I think the mind-altered Inquisitors themselves should be enough to provoke Stormhalt into action. You don't need to personally need to be there. This spy thing—"

"We need to make sure, Adam. Relax. Worst thing that happens is I die a bunch."

"Oh, that's the worst thing, is it?" Adam murmured with a sneer. "That's what you're actually looking forward to. Everything going to hell, you getting obliterated by a Titansbane over and over again, somehow getting a new Skill Evolution, bringing back more bad news afterwards, driving my blood pressure to new heights."

Shiv started laughing. "I'm going to be fine. And if we do this right, we'll have every opportunity to save Blackedge while Sullain and Titansbane are busy smashing each other's heads in."

"That is the ideal outcome," Valor said. "But don't fixate on that. The main goal should be to get the Necrotechs and the Inquisition to face each other. Should we be able to get their Legendary Pathbearer to fight the Vicar on our behalf, that would be optimal. But be ready to adapt if it does not happen. Sullain is no true warrior. If he is not fully cornered, he will flee and unleash spells from afar or from a dimension that she cannot reach."

"By then, it might be too late anyway," Shiv said. "We don't need to kill Sullain to complete the Quest. We just need to save Blackedge or send him running." After that, Shiv pulled up the Quest menu, and his mouth almost started watering as he stared at the Legendary Skill Evolution reward. "Soon," Shiv breathed lustfully, "soon there will be three true monsters to this equation."

Quest: Break Vicar Sullain's siege of Blackedge and stop another war between the surface and the Abyss before it can begin.

Success: Evolve an [Existing Skill] to Legendary-Tier.

Failure: The Abyss rises, consuming all surface territory of Lost Angeles.

Adam sighed. "Are you staring at the Quest again, Shiv?"

"Yesss," Shiv moaned. "Legendary Skill... I see it... I need it... I can almost taste it..."

"Shiv, you know, I still think it's completely bullshit that you are the only one who got this Quest. Especially considering how much work I'm doing."

"But you're going to get something more than a Legendary Skill, Adam," Shiv said offhandedly. "Your greater-than-Legendary Skill is my friendship."

Adam just stared flatly at Shiv. "That's a shit skill. I want another."

"I don't think I shit out another mother for you, but I can try."

Adam just stared at Shiv for a long moment. "Part of me wants to hit you. Another part of me is so desperate for us to succeed that I'll be happy to see just how monstrous you get."

"Have you considered which skill you would select for the reward?" Uva asked.

Shiv let out a grunt of uncertainty. "I was thinking maybe—"

"Is it Toughness?" Adam interrupted. Shiv closed his mouth. Adam threw his head back and barked a laugh. "You're very predictable, you know that."

"Yeah, but it's also really reliable," Shiv shot back, shuffling slightly. "Look, it's either Toughness or a Magical Skill. Probably Chronomancy. I might even be leaning toward Chronomancy."

"Oh," Adam breathed. "That is good."

"Yeah, but I'm not sure yet," Shiv said. "It's one of the two, though."

"Why not Reflexes?" Uva asked.

"Because my Reflexes already kill me right now once I get fast enough," Shiv answered. "I considered Physicality, but I don't want Legendary-Tier Physicality to be something that'll break my body apart because I don't have the Toughness to sustain myself, just like Reflexes. That, and I don't know what edge Legendary Physicality could provide me against Sullain. He still has that felling Necromancy sun attack. I got no defense against it, other than lighting up like a bomb. But that was how he harvested my Vitae in the first place. I'm not keen on doing a repeat of that."

"What about your Vitaemancy?" Adam asked. Shiv paused. He hadn't thought about that at all. His Vitaemancy was a Unique Skill. And with how strange it was, how it seemed to lack any presence within his body, he didn't even regard it like he did the other skills.

"I haven't actually thought of that," Shiv muttered. "Unique Skill. Made it slip my mind. Can you even evolve those with Quest rewards?"

Valor's illusory form flickered slightly. "The result may be unusual, but it should be possible."

"Well, then it's worth thinking about," Adam said.

"Perhaps, but I suggest against it," Valor interjected. "It could be something extremely potent, but more likely than not, it will take Shiv a great deal of time to learn what the Vitaemancy Skill Evolution can do. It took him time to understand Vitaemancy itself, after all. Unique Skills are this way. They are complicated, and sometimes inscrutable. There is no one who came before you to give you instructions, no tutorial. You are the trailblazer, and you are your own teacher. In times of desperation, it is best to stick with reliable options."

Adam nodded in agreement after that.

Shiv huffed. "Alright, I'll keep thinking about it a little more. That's still a little bit away. Let's go touch base with Whisper and the other sneakies. It's time the Inquisition did most of the fighting for us."

After that meeting came to an end, Uva approached Shiv and asked to talk with him. She led him to a secluded part within the bunker containing the Tutorial Gateway. And after she triple-checked no one was there, she asked him to help remove her armor.

He did, wondering why she needed help when she could turn into a sheet of paper for just a moment, and then they proceeded to do something that wasn't entirely talking for a while. Shiv also discovered that the bunker's reinforced titanium was of good quality.

After they recovered from their initial “discussion,” Uva lifted her head off his chest and let out a hesitant sigh. Shiv ran a hand through her short, pale-white hair. “What? What’s wrong?”

Uva bit her lip uneasily and forced her words out before fear could overtake her courage. “Another Outsider god has noticed me. They reached into me.”

Shiv went stiff. “Another one? What do you mean they reached into you?”

“The Eldest,” Uva said. “They whispered to me, so quietly that I don't think even the Dreamtaker could hear. So far, the Dreamtaker doesn't even seem capable of noticing their presence. I tried asking her about the Eldest, but each time, it's like she cannot hear me. She cannot hear me because the Eldest has occupied another portion of my being and hides from her.”

Shiv felt a chill rush through his veins, and a dim memory lit up inside him. “The Eldest,” Shiv said. “What's their deal? What do they want?”

“So far, just to understand me. But they seek some kind of synthesis—and they have placed something inside my mind. They have asked me to commune with their avatar. To do that, I need to find a place that is absolutely silent. And I have no idea where that might be.”

“Do you even want to talk to them?” Shiv asked. Uva bit her scarred lip again, and he ran a thumb along her cheek. She grasped his hand and rose up from his torso. As she looked down at him, he stared into

her colorful eyes, eyes that stabbed at his sanity, but provoked him to look and to keep looking, to never stop looking.

"I have been reading Confriga's Tome. I have delved into some of its mysteries during my spare time," Uva whispered. "The Outside is..." She held out a hand, and for a moment, Shiv saw a faint aura glisten around her flesh. "It's close, yet separated. It's like it exists in the same space as we do, yet there is an additional axis of distance, one that cannot be accessed. Do you understand?"

Shiv licked his lips and tried to conceptualize what she was saying. "A bit, but it's pretty murky to me. I know the Eldritch stuff is weird. I don't really like thinking about it too much, but I always kind of imagined the Outside to be separated from us by a wall."

"By a threshold, yes," Uva said. "Not exactly a wall, but a defined border. As you said, weird." She hesitated. "The Outside is seeping into me. Into my soul first. A few of my other skills have changed as well."

Shiv sat up and pulled her to his side. His heart pounded with nervous strain. "How bad?"

"I don't know," Uva said, sounding more uncertain than ever before. "I've been having trances recently."

"Trances?" Shiv asked.

"Yes, moments where my thoughts are my own, but also something more. It's like my mind has a mind of its own. And that there are other things living inside of me." She closed her eyes and concentrated. Her flesh pulsed momentarily with a flash of kaleidoscopic color, and for a beat, Shiv saw an ocean of strange, shifting creatures swimming within her body, like things that lived in the depths of the sea. And

her body wasn't a body anymore. It was like a keyhole to another place. A portal to the Outside. There, something else was peering in. Something was trying to shape her from portal to doorway.

And then the glow faded, and she was herself again. "I've been hiding this from my Sisters," she whispered, as if the bunker itself would betray her. "From the Exalted Mothers. Even Adam doesn't know. But this is... The changes are happening faster, and even the Dreamtaker can't help me. I'm afraid. I don't know what will happen to me—if I will remain myself if this continues."

"You will," Shiv insisted. "I'll make sure." Slowly, he summoned his Vitae. "You said your skills changed."

"Yes," Uva breathed. "It changed just a few hours ago. When we first got back from the ambush."

"Alright," Shiv breathed. "Let's see what the Outsider's doing to your soul."

Carefully, gently, he directed tendrils of red and white mana into her. Her breath hitched. He could feel her heart pumping fast, her skin flushing with heat, and—

And something seized Shiv's Vitae tight, and began crawling its way across into him as well...